

Creating a Racially Just Los Angeles: COVID-19, the Movement for Black Lives, and the Role of Equitable Public Infrastructure Investments

We are in a time of generational crisis. The coronavirus pandemic and the national outcry for racial justice expose longstanding rifts along race and class lines. In LA County, COVID-19 is disproportionately claiming the lives and livelihoods of low-income workers, Black, Latino, and Indigenous people. Recent data show that Black and Latino residents are dying from COVID-19 at twice the rate of white residents. At the same time, George Floyd's murder—a flashpoint in the Movement for Black Lives—has inspired many more people to demand justice, structural change, divestment from law enforcement, and reparations. This historic moment creates conditions conducive to progress towards health equity and racial justice that is long overdue.

As health equity advocates, we know that health outcomes are patterned by racism and shaped by the environments in which people live—the air we breathe, the water we drink, the places we work (if we are employed), the homes we live in (if we have one), and how safe we are in our parks or on our streets. To achieve health equity and racial justice, we must end policies and ways of “doing business” that have unevenly distributed health-promoting resources and environmental injustices. Racially unjust practices left too many people of color without the resources and opportunities to live safe and healthy lives long before COVID-19 arrived.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, “recovery” has been a constant refrain. Recovery is not good enough. It implies getting back to where we were, but the status quo left too many people out. In LA, we're reimagining a region that is racially and spatially just—one that produces health equity for Black, Indigenous, and all people of color (BIPOC). In the last few years, LA County voters passed four local ballot measures to fund public infrastructure that will reshape LA's landscape. They will generate a total of \$1.5 billion per year in taxpayer money to fund:

- Parks and open space (Measure A)
- Homelessness services and housing (Measure H)
- Transportation (Measure M)
- Green infrastructure to clean/capture stormwater and prevent flooding (Measure W)

The measures are now in their implementation phases. Public decision-makers are determining how and where to allocate these dollars. But with COVID-19 and economic and racial justice crises bearing down on us, it's easy to forget these measures. Now is a critical moment to push decision-makers to prioritize taxpayer dollars *already* dedicated for parks, housing, transportation, and stormwater infrastructure to improve material conditions in BIPOC communities; accelerate a racially just pandemic response; and augment resources divested from criminal justice to where they are needed most: in neighborhoods.

In 2019, LA's Healthy Equitable Active Land Use (HEALU) Network hosted a four-part summit series. [Equity as a Through Line](#) explored what it would take to influence the implementation of voter-approved measures to achieve a healthier, more equitable region. The impetus for the four-part series was this: a “win” at the ballot box is just a beginning, not an end. Advocates fought hard to secure money for public infrastructure, but money alone is not enough. We recognized this as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to proactively direct resources to high-need communities; to influence agencies administering these measures; and to demand accountability and transparency for more equitable and inclusive processes. In total, nearly 400

participants—including residents, organizers, advocates, funders, and staff of 22 public agencies—came together to struggle with the legacy of racial and environmental injustice, and to amplify best practices in community engagement, needs-based priority setting, and effective use of data and evaluation to advance equitable development and resource allocation.

Now, in 2020, as we grapple with the pandemic and draw inspiration from the Movement for Black Lives, we want to share an overview of the series because the fundamental lessons that emerged from the summits apply to the quest for a racially just recovery. The structural inequities the series explored persist. Whether we're looking at disparities in COVID-19 outcomes or the criminal justice system, this moment demonstrates that structural racism isn't limited to one system or sector, but that it runs through all of them like poisoned groundwater. Even as municipal budgets are decimated, residents shelter in place, local elected officials negotiate with community leaders to divest from criminal justice, and COVID-19 takes a disproportionate toll on Black and Brown lives, we still need to prioritize resources in high-need communities and we still must insist on equity, inclusion, transparency, and accountability. Each summit in the series points to systems-level issues that must be changed if we are to achieve a racially just recovery, using voter-approved resources to move us forward.

Equity as a Through Line: The Four-Part Summit Series

Part 1: Ensuring Equity in Infrastructure Investments (May 2, 2019)

"Securing equity places demands upon people, requiring us to look beyond our own welfare and recognize that the good of the community may be very different from our own self-interest or organizational interests." -Elva Yañez, Prevention Institute

The first summit set the foundation for the entire series, defining equity in practical terms and going beyond the moral argument for equity to give practitioners, advocates, and funders actionable guidance on how to embed equity and racial justice into their own work. Keynote speaker, Senator Kevin de León (CA Senate President pro Tempore, Emeritus) emphasized: "I believe strongly that you have to enshrine equity, so that it becomes systematic and guaranteed." Speakers discussed the challenges, progress, and successes they've seen in advancing equity, particularly in government settings where the power of the status quo and ways of "doing business" can reinforce historic inequities and produce present-day injustice.

Part 2: Building Capacity in Under-Resourced Communities (June 13, 2019)

"Equity must be embedded in everything we do to ensure that public dollars go into the areas that need them the most." -Alina Bokde, LA County Department of Parks & Recreation

The second summit elevated strategies to close gaps in power and capacity that exist in under-resourced communities, including unincorporated areas and smaller cities that for decades have borne the brunt of environmental injustice and disinvestment. Speakers discussed challenges and opportunities that smaller cities and unincorporated areas in LA County have faced with respect to mustering their capacity to compete for and invest in the public infrastructure that their residents need, particularly in the face of major demographic, socioeconomic, financial, and climatic shifts, as well as competing local priorities.

Part 3: Enhancing Community Engagement Practices (September 9, 2019)

*“Community engagement takes time and resources but is very valuable.”
-Isela Gracian, East LA Community Corporation (former)
“If it was easy then it wouldn’t be worth doing.” -Isela’s grandmother*

The focus of the third summit was building both public agency and community capacity for community engagement in public infrastructure investment processes. Speakers grounded participants in a vision of engagement that transcends the “check-the-box” activities and methods that planning processes often utilize. Instead, they called for a well-rounded set of engagement approaches rooted in values, including respect for community knowledge, history, and culture. Speakers underscored the need to invest in the capacity of local organizations and community leaders, not just during the “fight” to get a policy passed but also throughout the long process of implementing policy and funding measures to improve community conditions.

Part 4: Metrics for Healthy and Equitable Land Use (November 14, 2019)

*“Lift the bottom, grow the middle, and drive the top.”
-Dr. Manuel Pastor, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity*

The fourth and final summit in the series focused on data and evaluation for decision-making to achieve healthy and equitable land use policies and practices. The keynote, “Data, Narrative, and Power,” delivered by Dr. Manuel Pastor, put data and metrics in context of the economy, the values that underly our economic system, and major demographic shifts occurring regionally, California-wide, and nationally. He reminded participants that data and metrics are necessary but not sufficient: “Unless they’re part of a narrative, they’re just numbers.” Consistent with his unwavering commitment to power-building, Pastor emphasized that real change comes from organizing and power-building work. Data is a critical tool in the struggle.

Leveraging Public Infrastructure Funds for a Racially Just COVID-19 Response

On July 23, 2020, the LA County Board of Supervisors approved a motion declaring racism a public health crisis. The motion’s author, Supervisor Mark Ridley Thomas (SD-2) said, “The county must move to identify and confront explicit institutional racism to set the national standard and become a leader of antiracist policymaking and program implementation.” We wholeheartedly agree. Addressing racism as a health crisis will require LA County leaders to reset the norms, procedures, and policies that guide administration of public programs. Just a few of the lessons we drew from our summit series apply to this historic moment:

1. Public resources should be prioritized in high-need communities. They should improve material conditions in neighborhoods that have long experienced disinvestment and support organizations rooted there, particularly BIPOC-led organizations.
2. Passing a policy isn’t the end; it’s just the beginning. Administrators must demonstrate real commitments to racial justice and health equity throughout implementation.
3. Money alone is not enough. Processes that determine how resources are allocated should be needs-based, equitable, and inclusive. Administrators are responsible for creating conditions for inclusivity and participation of people closest to the problem.
4. Up-to-date, easy to understand, publicly accessible data is critical to show whether systems are making real progress on eliminating inequities.

The HEALU Network was formed to insist on fairness, transparency, and justice in all aspects of creating and maintaining our built environment. This moment of crisis reveals how urgently transformation is needed to achieve health equity and racial justice in LA and across the US.

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