

RECKONING

How Planners
Are Striving to
Make Their Cities—
and Their Profession—
More Equitable



By Jon Gorey

SOMETIMES COMMUNITY TRAUMA is born of natural disasters or other unexpected events. But in America's cities, much of the pain of the past century arose from carefully planned decisions that were meticulously mapped out in advance.

New highways that splintered or destroyed Black and brown neighborhoods. Racist zoning rules that intentionally blocked people of color from homeownership. A tendency to see even thriving Black and immigrant neighborhoods as "blighted," and in need of wrecking-ball revitalization. With these and other actions, the urban planning profession contributed to the systemic racism and segregation that plague our cities. But today's planners are trying to atone for that legacy.

Dozens of urban planners around the country have signed a "Commitment to Change" statement that grew out of conversations at the 2020 Big City Planning Directors Institute, an annual conference organized by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy that brings together top planners from America's 30 largest cities. "After the murder of George Floyd, it really crystallized that, as people who impact people's lives, invisibly and visibly, planners needed to be on the right side of history," says Eleanor Sharpe, Philadelphia's deputy director of planning and development—particularly given "the fraught history of our profession."

The resulting pledge, crafted by staffers from several cities and hosted by the City of Philadelphia, has two parts (see page 21). "One is to acknowledge the harm that our profession caused, and is still causing," Sharpe says. In Philadelphia, for example, highway construction bulldozed or bifurcated neighborhoods of color like Chinatown and Nicetown, and redlining—a practice in which lenders and others systematically denied mortgages based on race—left

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scars by blocking access to a key source of intergenerational wealth. "Most analysis of where social issues mushroom in our city, when mapped, align with redlining maps of years past," Sharpe says. "Redlining still has a stranglehold on our city decades later."

The second part of the statement focuses on the future, committing the signatories to investments in housing, open spaces, transportation, environmental justice, and public services, among other actions, "with the goal of creating inclusive, equitable communities." The pledge also prioritizes preserving and strengthening the culture, businesses, and institutions of communities of color, and preventing displacement caused by new investments.

While the public pledge has honed planners' focus on racial equity, cities everywhere are still struggling to provide equal access to opportunity, and any progress in dismantling entrenched systems of inequality is often slow and incremental. The seeds of today's systemic racism and inequities were sown decades ago, says Jessie Grogan, associate director of Reduced Poverty and Spatial Inequality at the Lincoln Institute, "and the tools that planners have in their toolboxes also take decades . . . it's not a profession with a lot of quick fixes."

But just as the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, and the second-best time is now, so it is with planning a more just future. In that spirit, here are some of the ways urban planners are working to restore trust, right historical wrongs, and advance racial equity in their cities.

Top to bottom: Protesters at Philadelphia's City Hall (1968), Boston's South End (1968), Philadelphia's Chinatown (1973), and Detroit's Cobo Hall (1963). Credits (top to bottom): Courtesy of the Special Collections Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia; Bill Ryerson/*The Boston Globe* via Getty Images; *Philadelphia Inquirer* Archives/Special Collections Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia; *Detroit News* staff photograph/Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Zoning for Equity

With the nation’s housing crisis falling hardest on low-income people and communities of color, who are more likely to experience homelessness due to the shortage of affordable housing, American Planning Association President Angela D. Brooks says reforms that lead to more housing are crucial to improving equity—in part because any conversation about equity rings hollow to someone with no place to live. “It’s something we could easily solve and fix,” she says, “and the first step is resolving to create more units of all tiers of housing, so people have a decent, safe, affordable place to live.”

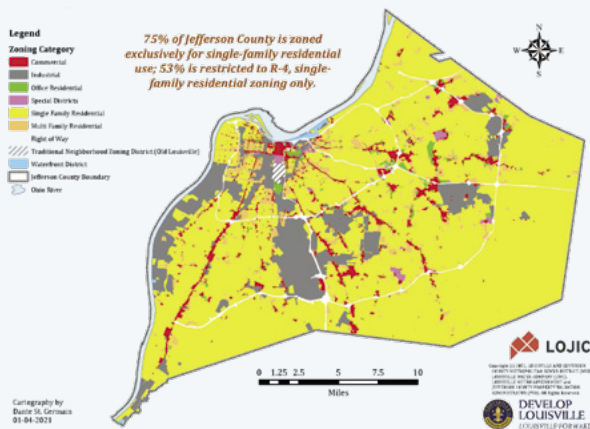
That’s one reason Emily Liu, director of the Louisville Metro Office of Planning, has been focused on updating the city’s zoning rules. In 2020, Liu and a team of volunteer planners and community members came up with 46 ways they

could improve equity in their city; six of the policies stood out as “things we could move on quickly,” Liu says.

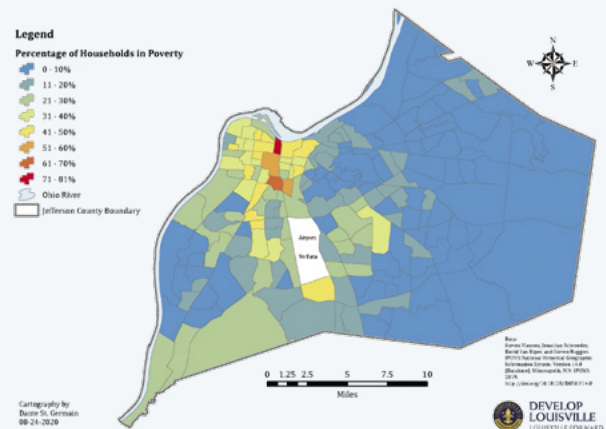
Some of those initial efforts, like allowing urban agriculture on any lot, received little or no opposition. But one proposal—allowing Louisville homeowners to build in-law apartments, or accessory dwelling units (ADUs), by right—did generate some pushback. Organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the Metropolitan Housing Coalition, and United Way helped produce educational materials and op-eds to counter some of the misinformation that circulated in the community, Liu says, helping to get the change passed. “This was definitely something we couldn’t do by ourselves. There was a lot of support from outside organizations and citizens.”

“The first step is resolving to create more units of all tiers of housing, so people have a decent, safe, affordable place to live.”

ZONING CLASSIFICATIONS IN LOUISVILLE METRO



POVERTY IN LOUISVILLE METRO, 2014–2018 ACS



Maps created by the Louisville Metro Office of Planning illustrate the inequitable impacts of single-family zoning, part of an in-depth exploration of discriminatory local land policies. Credit: Louisville Metro Office of Planning (louisvilleky.gov/government/planning-design/confronting-racism-zoning).



A walking tour of “missing middle” housing in Louisville, part of an effort to engage and educate the community about the need for more multifamily housing options in the city. Credit: Louisville Metro Office of Planning.

Previously, adding an ADU had required securing a conditional use permit; now, accessory units are allowed by right in Louisville, as long as they meet some basic standards, and can be rented out if the owner lives on site. “The great majority of them are approved in office by our staff, and it only takes a day or two, it’s very easy,” Liu says, noting that the city saw a tenfold increase in ADU applications in the first year after the zoning change went into effect.

Liu also managed to get front setback requirements reduced from 25 or 30 feet down to 15 feet, freeing up more space for potential ADUs. And she pushed for a small but meaningful change that will allow for duplexes on lots smaller than 5,000 square feet if they’re zoned for multifamily use. A mere 6 percent of the city is zoned for multifamily homes, Liu says, and among those lots were “10,000 parcels where, in the past, you were zoned multifamily, but you were not allowed to build even a duplex” because the lot didn’t meet the minimum size requirement.

Those are just a few examples of how small but crucial zoning changes can begin to address inequity. APA’s new *Equity in Zoning Policy Guide* is a user-friendly resource that lays out dozens more specific recommendations to help dismantle systemic inequities through three aspects of zoning: the rules themselves, the people involved in drafting them, and the ways they’re applied and enforced (APA 2023).

“It really focuses on the ways that bias and historic patterns of segregation are reinforced

through zoning,” Brooks says. “But it also offers specific ways to change drafting and public engagement, mapping, and even the enforcement of zoning regulations to dismantle barriers and expand opportunity.”

Other cities, such as Minneapolis, Portland, and Arlington, Virginia—and even some states, like California, Oregon, and Maine—have managed to pass more sweeping upzoning measures that allow for ADUs or small multifamily homes on almost any residential lot. Atlanta and Denver, among others, are also in the process of making major zoning reforms.

Liu’s department is now working to engage and educate the community around missing middle housing—conducting walking tours, for example, through Louisville’s oldest neighborhoods, to show residents how duplexes and triplexes were once abundant in the city before being zoned nearly out of existence after World War II. “The goal is to see where we can allow this by right,” Liu says, noting that such smaller, denser homes “are naturally occurring affordable housing.”

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Outreach by Washington, DC, planners includes attendance at neighborhood events (left) and teen workshops (right). Credit: DC Office of Planning.

'Relentless' Outreach

Planning departments are also getting more active in expanding their reach beyond the older, wealthy, white male homeowners who tend to dominate public input sessions—and making a concerted push to connect with residents who have been missing from the conversation.

"A big part of it is going to where people are," says Washington, DC, Planning Director Anita Cozart—and being "relentless" about it. That means attending community festivals, block parties, and youth group meetings to seek input on any specific plans in the works, or to simply let people know how to engage with the department. "If we have a meeting and somebody says, 'I didn't know this process was happening, where's the outreach been?'" she says, "we're calling that person up, and asking them about their networks," and the best way to connect with them.

For more than a decade, Philadelphia has offered a Citizens Planning Institute, which teaches residents about the city planning process and how they can be a part of it—"and at some point, take that knowledge back to their neighborhood, and leverage it in some way that's useful to their community," Sharpe says.

The program has become so popular, staff can't keep up with demand. There are currently two cohorts a year—a spring and fall session

with 30-plus people in each—but upwards of 200 people typically apply.

"We're setting up citizens for success, we're pulling the veil down," Sharpe says, "so people can understand what's going on, and how things happen in government." The program's 700-plus alumni live all over the city and can help improve communication at neighborhood meetings. "They can act as our translators," she says. "There's a trust factor there that doesn't necessarily exist" between residents and planning officials.

Renters, meanwhile, who are more likely than homeowners to be people of color and have lower average incomes, have long been ignored in zoning or development discussions. So in Louisville, when a project involves a public meeting, the city now requires applicants to notify nearby renters, not just abutting homeowners. "Their landlord may live in California, but they're the ones who live here, who will be impacted by proposed development," Liu says.

As a renter herself, Brooks favors such efforts and says cities should pursue other channels of communication as well. "In the age of social media, there are so many ways we can get notice out to people that it is irresponsible, and just inexcusable, not to be utilizing more creative ways," she says. "Even if I owned my home and you sent me a letter, there's a high probability I won't see that until long after your meeting."

Applying an Equity Lens

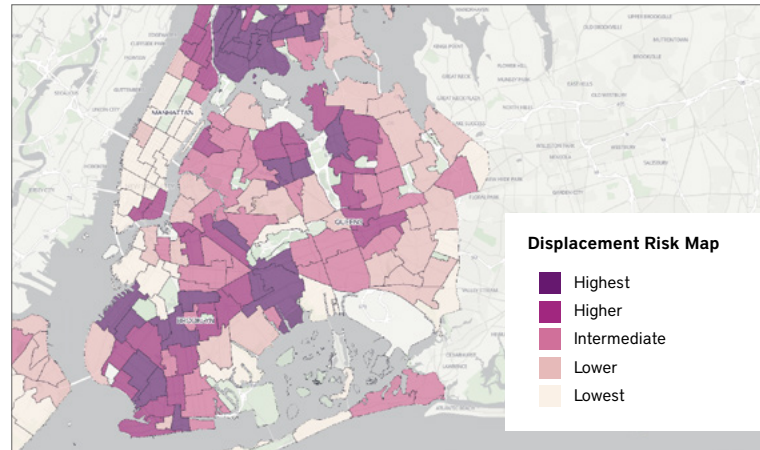
Several big cities, including New York and Washington, now require change of use or other development applications to include some form of racial equity impact report. Such an assessment injects a measure of accountability into the process that has too often been missing, based on a simple question: Will the proposed change make progress toward *advancing* racial equity, or will it *worsen* existing inequities?

Assessing the potential racial equity impacts of new development or zoning changes as part of the official planning process is a simple but important step, Grogan says. “Making sure that you think about the equity impacts of every project is a practice that doesn’t necessarily cost anything, and can add a lot of value to the day-to-day planning work,” she says.

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New York City’s Department of City Planning partnered with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to create an interactive Equitable Data Development Explorer that maps out neighborhood-level displacement risk and disaggregated data on race, economic security, housing market pressures, health outcomes, and other key indicators (City of New York 2022). Applicants submitting a newly required racial equity report as part of their land use review must cite relevant data from the tool and include a narrative statement that explains how their project and its neighborhood context “relate to the city’s commitment to affirmatively furthering fair housing and promoting equitable access to opportunity.”

In Philadelphia, where Mayor Jim Kenney tasked all city departments with creating racial equity action plans, Sharpe says the city is trying



New York City’s Equitable Data Development Explorer includes maps of displacement risk, health outcomes, and other key indicators. Credit: NYC Department of City Planning.

to incorporate equity analysis into the capital programs budget cycle, asking agencies that receive capital funds to explain how each dollar will contribute to or dismantle systemic racism. “We’re trying to very much embed it in the culture and the philosophy of how work is approached,” she says, noting that it’s still a work in progress.

And in Washington, DC, planners use disaggregated data to assess “the benefits and burdens that might come from a change in zoning,” Cozart says, including the potential for displacement. The District’s neighborhood-level small area plans now feature a similar “Equity in Place” analysis, which can yield different priorities in different neighborhoods (City of Washington, DC). In the wealthy, majority white neighborhood of Chevy Chase, for example, the small area plan seeks to add dedicated affordable housing and remedy the area’s long history of discriminatory land use. In Congress Heights, a predominantly Black neighborhood experiencing increased redevelopment, the focus is on anti-displacement and community resilience measures.

“We ask sets of questions, but it’s a different demographic so you end up with different recommendations, different thrusts of the planning effort, even if you’re doing the same things, like disaggregating the data by race, and engaging the folks who have been marginalized from the process,” Cozart says.

Asking Why

When San Diego Planning Director Heidi Vonblum was working on the Build Better SD initiative—an effort to support equitable, sustainable development citywide that was adopted by the city council in 2022—she interrogated longstanding policies in search of a valid reason for their existence. She and her staff would ask why something was done the way it was, and why that was, and why *that* was, and so on, until they reached a root cause. Spoiler: The origin stories of some policies more closely resembled a greedy villain’s backstory than that of a superhero.



“Sometimes it was a good idea at the time, sometimes it made sense based on information that planners had available to them,” Vonblum says. “And sometimes it was really wrong, and there’s just no need to continue that.”

That philosophy helped Vonblum’s department make a series of changes, approved by the city council in stages over the last two years.

It began with rewriting the almost 70-year-old Parks Master Plan, and challenging traditional community engagement methods that were resulting in public feedback along the lines of, “We love it, don’t change it, everything’s fine,” Vonblum says. “What was interesting about that Phase One input is that everything’s *not* fine.”

So in addition to seeking input from under-represented voices, Vonblum and a handful of staff members drove around San Diego during the pandemic and documented the starkly contrasting conditions of the city’s recreational spaces in a StoryMap called “One City, Two Realities,” to better educate neighborhood groups and other stakeholders (City of San Diego 2021). “Parts of our city have glowing, gleaming, beautiful parks, and then we have other parts of our city that have far more people—and more children and seniors, who tend to use parks the most—that have a park, but it’s got nothing to do, or it has broken playground equipment, and that’s not okay.”

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During the pandemic, planners in San Diego documented the differences among city parks, including Clay Avenue Mini Park (top) and Carmel Mountain Ranch Community Park (bottom). Credit: San Diego Planning Department (www.sandiego.gov/buildbettersd).



Residents across San Diego have participated in the development of a Parks Master Plan, which will help guide investments in areas with the greatest need. Credit: San Diego Planning Department.

“Progress can be slow and painful, but we’ve made so much progress just in the last couple of years. We went from having very difficult and controversial conversations to *boom, boom, boom*—actions are happening right now.”

A key aspect of Build Better SD was changing the city’s system of collecting and spending neighborhood-specific development impact fees. These one-time fees, which developers pay to defray the cost of municipal infrastructure and services associated with new development, varied drastically across the city, and had to be spent in the neighborhood where they were raised. Per-unit impact fees were up to 50 times higher in wealthy districts, discouraging denser growth in well-off areas while simultaneously concentrating reinvestment in those same places. The city has now shifted to a citywide fee structure, where impact fees are the same across every neighborhood and infrastructure investments can be prioritized for areas with the greatest need.

Some changes were unpopular at first, taking a couple of tries to get through the city council. But they have laid the groundwork for other equity-driven initiatives. “Progress can be slow

and painful, but we’ve made so much progress just in the last couple of years,” Vonblum says. “We went from having very difficult and controversial conversations to *boom, boom, boom*—actions are happening right now,” she adds. “We’re now focusing on increasing access to our coastal resources and increasing connections between communities through a citywide trails master plan,” as well as developing a master plan for a new regional park in an underserved neighborhood whose requests for green space were left on the back burner for 20 years.

As planners, Vonblum says, “we need to take an opportunity to say, ‘Okay, why do we plan for parks this way? Why do we collect development impact fees this way? Why did we prioritize infrastructure investments this way?’ Until we do that, we’re not going to be able to make any forward progress to advance equity, to advance anti-racist zoning policies, and to invest equitably in our communities.”

Building the Planner Pipeline

At the Big City Planning Directors Institute in October 2022, Liu shared how inspired she felt by the number of other women and people of color in the room, which marked a big change from her first such conference 10 years earlier, she recalled.

But despite that encouraging shift in representation at the top, the profession is still largely white. With an eye on building a profession that better reflects the population it serves, Sharpe and other planners take every opportunity to promote planning to young people of color.

“Our staff is always eager and volunteering in high schools and middle schools, because a lot of planners heard about this later in life, and we want to say, ‘Hey, here’s a legitimate profession that you can do, especially if you want to help your neighborhood out,’” Sharpe says. “It’s feeding the pipeline, so that hopefully in 10 years, the more people hear about it, then the pipeline is not just producing mostly white people.”

Cozart and her team conduct similar efforts around Washington. “We’ve been visiting with high school students to just talk about planning and to engage them in mapping, to engage them in analyzing data that planners use, and to really think about design—the design of communities and what spaces are going to be welcoming for you,” she says.

Given the timelines of most neighborhood and comprehensive plans, those high schoolers may be the ones turning today’s recommendations into tomorrow’s more equitable urban reality.

After all, Cozart adds, given the 10- and 20-year timelines of neighborhood and comprehensive plans, those high schoolers may be the ones turning today’s recommendations into tomorrow’s more equitable urban reality. □

Jon Gorey is a staff writer for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.



FURTHER LISTENING

Listen to our *Land Matters* podcast about planning and structural racism with guests **Eleanor Sharpe**, deputy director of planning and development for the City of Philadelphia, and **Andrea Durbin**, former director of planning and sustainability for the City of Portland.

www.lincolnst.edu/podcast-planners-equity

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Statement on the Role of Planners in Contributing to Racial Inequity, and a Commitment to Change

The undersigned planning directors of United States cities acknowledge the role that city planners have played in contributing to systemic racism and segregation. We commit to working together toward an equitable future for our communities and invite all US planning directors to sign the statement and join us in this critical endeavor.

As directors of agencies that plan for the future of cities, towns, and regions, we stand in solidarity with those whose goal is to transform communities into places of opportunity for everyone. We commit to changing our practices, policies, regulations, and actions to create inclusive and diverse neighborhoods and cities that equitably meet the needs of all residents, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

- **Whereas**, many past practices, directly or indirectly involving planning agencies and planning professionals, contributed to racial inequities in US cities.
- **Whereas**, urban redevelopment and urban renewal policies, which often designated BIPOC neighborhoods as “blighted” with the intent of revitalizing these communities through new construction, often led to wholesale clearance of these neighborhoods by eminent domain and to displaced residents with few housing choices.
- **Whereas**, physical, economic, and cultural displacement of residents, businesses, and institutions has occurred through actions such as zoning changes and development approvals that did not analyze the broad array of community needs and therefore did not address the direct and indirect impacts of these decisions.

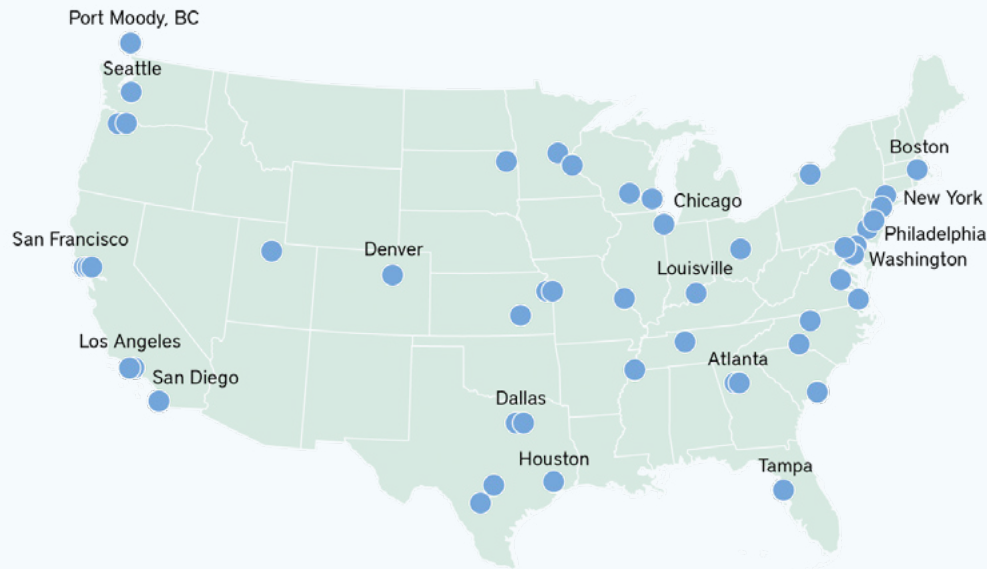
- **Whereas**, construction of new public infrastructure, especially highways, disproportionately harmed BIPOC communities, often resulting in the destruction of entire neighborhoods and commercial districts.
- **Whereas**, cities intentionally disinvested in and neglected BIPOC communities while disproportionately creating public amenities for white residents, which deepened inequities and concentrated poverty in underserved communities.
- **Whereas**, “redlining,” the practice of geographically barring low-income BIPOC households from access to mortgages and lending, eliminated a critical source of multigenerational wealth for these communities.
- **Whereas**, racial covenants and deed restrictions in many communities blatantly prevented the sale of property to BIPOC.
- **Whereas**, exclusionary zoning practices, including the creation of single-family or other low-density districts, disallowed more affordable multifamily buildings and usually eliminated access to these neighborhoods for lower-income residents.
- **Whereas**, environmental injustices, including the siting of toxic activities in neighborhoods primarily occupied by BIPOC, exposed residents to more environmental stressors, including air and soil pollution, illegal dumping, and transportation impacts.
- **Whereas**, poor-quality public housing, combined with a lack of funding for ongoing maintenance and improvements and few on-site services, resulted in the warehousing of very poor households in segregated environments that were physically deteriorated, isolated from adjacent communities, and often unsafe.

We further recognize and acknowledge that due to the actions noted above, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other natural disasters have disproportionately affected BIPOC communities, which have experienced ongoing health, economic, and environmental stresses.

Planning and Equity: A Commitment to Change

The planning directors hereby commit to become agents of change for our cities; to recognize that many of the following measures must be tailored uniquely to each city; to advocate for and to foster justice and equal access to opportunity; to use not only zoning and other existing planning tools but also new tools proposed by impacted and BIPOC communities to correct past harms; to achieve systemic change by rethinking public and private systems and evaluating benefits and burdens, all with the goal of creating inclusive, equitable communities, by:

- **Creating communities that are culturally diverse, livable, and accessible** through investments in housing, open spaces, transportation, quality amenities, and public services; by reducing exposure to environmental pollution and risks associated with climate change; and by ensuring that such investments do not lead to displacement or exacerbate inequities;
- **Promoting development while addressing possible displacement**, employing specific policies and regulations that discourage economic displacement, and specifically disallowing physical displacement without comparable, high-quality replacement housing;
- **Preserving, strengthening, and celebrating the culture, assets, institutions, and businesses** of BIPOC communities, to honor their significance and prevent their erasure;
- **Championing housing choice and economically diverse neighborhoods**, including by dismantling exclusionary zoning policies and regulations, allowing diverse housing types and sizes in all neighborhoods, accommodating the needs of different family types, and providing transit and other public services for all neighborhoods;
- **Developing land use strategies that promote the health, economic, social, and cultural resilience of BIPOC communities**; establishing affordable and inclusionary housing goals that support wealth-building through asset ownership; and working to create specific policies and funding mechanisms to help realize these goals;
- **Addressing a history of environmental injustice** to BIPOC communities by cleaning up areas polluted by noxious activities, relocating such activities where possible, and creating amenities to counteract the impacts on surrounding neighborhoods;
- **Explicitly acknowledging that quality, safe housing for all, in every neighborhood, is a foundational goal of our work** and using the voices and practices enabled by our leadership roles to communicate this belief to elected officials and communities and to act on it accordingly;
- **Promoting public dialogue** about the damaging effects of structural inequity on our communities, seeking input from all residents but especially BIPOC, and advancing ideas and solutions that explicitly reflect and respect such input, using a broad array of new and existing outreach tools to include these populations in our work;



Map of signatories to the Commitment to Change statement. Credit: Philadelphia City Planning Commission.

- **Recognizing that change in our communities occurs at the speed of trust;** that is, rebuilding trust must precede other work toward change for that work to succeed; we will rebuild trust by publicly valuing and embracing the lived experiences of our communities;
- **Providing education on planning practice and policies** to underrepresented populations, and collaborating with these communities on how best to conduct these educational processes;
- **Exposing students to the planning profession, collaborating with educational institutions at all levels,** working toward a more diverse pool of practitioners in the coming years;
- **Addressing biases in the organizational culture of our agencies and creating diverse staffs** that reflect the makeup of our communities; providing opportunities in our organizations for BIPOC to obtain employment and rise to leadership positions; setting goals for these positions within specified time frames; and adopting clear policies and guidance for staff retention and career advancement;
- **Using tools such as racial equity impact assessments** to interrogate how existing and potential land use, design, and zoning policies and practices impact BIPOC communities;
- **Using data to disaggregate information by race and to better analyze qualitative measures of our communities' lived experiences** to inform policymaking and to create indicators and performance measures for tracking progress in the future.

The planning directors acknowledge that we cannot do this work alone. In addition to collaborating with affected communities, we will work with public, private, and nonprofit entities. We commit to using our voices, our practice, and our unique set of tools to achieve these partnerships, work toward these goals, and create systemic change.

To learn more, visit www.phila.gov/departments/philadelphia-city-planning-commission/about/planning-and-equity-a-commitment-to-change.