

Equity as the Framework for City Project Design

Oakland's Daniel Hamilton Applies an Equity Checklist to City Projects

How well does this work? What drives the equity framing, both for Daniel and for Oakland? How did his recent attendance at the CNCA Annual Meeting impact his perspective? Read on to find out.

Q. You and Jennifer Green (Burlington) have been discussing equity as we move towards energy transformation. It could potentially lead to a USDN Innovation Fund proposal. As part of that discussion, you shared an Equity Checklist that Oakland developed in 2015 to serve as a review both for projects and processes in the city. How has this worked over the past few years? Have you seen a difference in how city projects are designed due to use of this Checklist?



A. Oakland's [Equity Checklist](#) was built upon a base of engagement with Oakland's disadvantaged communities, as well as with input from policy makers and professionals. It has been used in the selection of areas to receive priority status for local and regional funding. We call them our "Priority Conservation/Development Areas", and we have sought grant funding to use the Checklist in broader applications.

Right now, we are at a transition point with the Checklist. In 2 years, I'll likely have a more robust answer, but so far, the Checklist use has been hit and miss - perhaps 2 misses per hit. The biggest win is our local Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) program. Power delivery from this CCA program will begin in 2018 in Alameda County's 14 cities. This is when the rubber meets the road on the equitability of the CCA's structure. It will be interesting to see how effectively equity is incorporated, because the initial procurement strategy does not include the equity aspect. There are a lot of elected officials asking the equity questions right now. For example: do we have a substantial amount of accessible jobs, or a plan for job creation with the roll out of city programs?

Oakland has learned to leverage sponsors to do things like energy benchmarking. Partially due to our small size, we have not had a great deal of high profile projects under our belt, yet. One, however, is the implementation of an update of our local electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure codes. We know there is a huge equity gap here, and we had some success narrowing it. Another is that we are in talks with Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) about shutting down the Natural Gas Peaker plant which contributes the most to poor air quality in a disadvantaged neighborhood.

Q. You also mention that Oakland is part of a few innovation projects to bring energy innovation to disadvantaged neighborhoods - primarily funded through the State of California's Energy Commission's research and development arm. What are your hopes for those projects?

A. Yes, these include the Oakland [EcoBlock](#) project, which is designed to focus on energy (including solar generation), energy storage at a microgrid scale, deep water reduction, and transportation improvements (including shared EVs) on a block by block basis. Currently, the project area is in a lower income neighborhood on Oakland's north side. This placement offers us a chance to show how we can do neighborhood scale energy efficiency in a traditionally neglected build environment. While still in the planning stage, there are several areas of promise so far.

Equity as the Framework for City Projects Design

The City's primary interest in the Oakland EcoBlock is that it has the greatest potential for scaled change in the existing building stock. We want to turn a whole city block into a zero-net energy area. This block has some of the most energy-intensive housing stock that we have in urban environments, anywhere. How do we transform these buildings to help meet our climate goals? The project has many interesting elements, but the most interesting piece for me is that there are local government barriers hindering the transition of our neighborhoods over time.

All 50 U.S. States deal with these issues, and largely in the same ways. We have standards and conditions that do not apply anymore. The guides we will create from this project detailing the lessons we learn will likely be more valuable than knowing which fly-wheel battery is most efficient at the end of the day. CA's Energy Commission will let Oakland share these resources when they are ready. I want to share them widely, through the American Planning Association (APA), the National League of Cities, and USDN.

Q. Regarding transportation, you mentioned updating your EV infrastructure codes from an equity standpoint. What is changing in your approach to transit improvements?

A. We have rolled out a bike share program recently, with 850 electronic bikes. We have a program to reduce the cost if you live in certain disadvantaged neighborhoods. This not only increases affordability but also helps provide a marketing vehicle to talk to residents about the program. We have learned from watching other cities that some neighborhoods will reject bike share if the equity issue is not addressed upfront. Public receptiveness to bike share programs is not universal, so we must find ways to have these new program conversations in a way that is inclusive and without judgement.

Q. How did you become sensitive to the equity issue?

A. I grew up a step or two removed from abject poverty. My parents found a way to break out of the poor social circumstances in which they had been raised. My mom lived in 17 different cities and graduated valedictorian from her 12th school. That kind of instability was a huge challenge for her to overcome. My dad was 10 years old the first time he had to pull a gun on his father. That man was still my grandfather; I grew up camping with him in the Ozarks. Seeing that culture and seeing the way my parents broke the cycle through education has deeply influenced me.

My parents also instilled in me a strong sense of community service. It was their own version of sustainability. They pointed out to me the parts of our social system that are not working, and noted that these are the things that impact the least resilient among us. I got to live in a stable household growing up, with food on the table, and a road trip vacation each summer. I have a legacy to protect. My parents taught me to value the people who are struggling the most, and not to overlook their misery. I work to do things like improve local air quality, as tangible ways I can help improve disadvantaged lives.

Equity as the Framework for City Projects Design

I want to know the stories of the people who do what I do. It helps me understand why sustainability directors are so passionate and good at this work. We get it at a human level. We should talk more about what brings us into this field, and be strengthened by each other's stories.

Q. What drives City of Oakland's journey into equity conversation?

A. Most of our issues here in Oakland are around policing, which is steeped in historic inequities. We have our share of dirty power plants, heavy industry, and a general lack of responsiveness. Historically, this is how Oakland is understood. Everything I do is in the context of this: Oakland is still violent, and still has policing inequities. That influences my sustainability work and approach.

People who work full time in equity are traditionally more sensitive to these issues. In our sustainability world, we start from the perspective of "we have these huge goals, so now how do we get there?" For instance, today, you and I have largely talked about the climate related equity issues. But the climate conversation is only part of the greater equity challenge.

I just read Sam Brooks' article ([No, Cities Are Not Actually Leading on Climate. Enough With the Mindless Cheerleading, June 2017](#)), and while I certainly did not agree with all of it, his points about exuberant cheerleading from the sidelines are apt. We often sing the praises of our own progress without fully understanding their impacts. Most of the people we serve are just trying to make it through the day. When we approach from the cheerleading perspective, we miss some of the communication and behavior change lessons we need to be learning.

Q. What are your key takeaways from the CNCA Annual meeting?

A. That time with CNCA members broadened my perspective in thinking about how I can best serve the residents in my community. In talking with the international cities, the difference in our priorities, challenges, and approaches really struck me. Professionally, these new relationships will be tremendously valuable to me over the years in my work. My horizons are broadened. The story of Auckland's (New Zealand) [sustainability journey](#) particularly resonated with me. Having the global thought leaders to do deep dives on these issues, let me benefit.

The most immediate impact is that I signed up to participate or observe on several of the incoming CNCA Innovation Fund proposals. I was just working on the zero-waste single use plastic ban this morning. I brought back cut sheets from cities who are leading interesting work. For instance, Yokohama's proposal on carbon sequestration with sea grasses is important to people in the Bay Area. I brought this back to my colleagues, so they can be aware of it. It's not just the availability of funds that are helpful - these are very limited funds to try to tackle large issues with. Instead, it is more the access to ideas and collaborations these funding opportunities provide that make the Innovation Funds so valuable.