

# Planning for Equity



# Why centering equity in a capital improvement plan is essential to preventing long-term disparities in infrastructure, ensuring fair access to public services, and supporting healthier, more resilient neighborhoods citywide.

BY JOHN R. BARTLE

**C**apital improvement plans (CIPs) in part determine which capital projects will be funded, and that affects the quality of infrastructure and public services for communities. In any jurisdiction, the quality of capital and plans for

capital improvement may vary from one neighborhood to another, and for neighborhoods made up of different ethnicities, races, and classes, service levels may differ for many years, creating long-term inequities.

GFOA's best practices recommend that "local, state, and provincial governments should establish a system for assessing their capital assets and then appropriately plan and budget for any capital maintenance and replacement needs."<sup>1</sup> The recommended practices don't include specific distribution or equity approaches—although some governments do.

This study examines the CIPs of the 25 largest U.S. cities<sup>2</sup> to determine the presence or absence of references to equity in the plan, along with common and exemplary practices. Many cities stress access in their CIPs, and some have major CIP goals that emphasize equity. Some analyze variations in service quality when making their investment decisions. Few emphasize resident participation. This article includes recommendations for cities that want to more fully integrate equity into their infrastructure planning.

## What is equity?

In the book titled *Teaching Public Budgeting and Finance: A Practical Guide*, Bruce McDonald and Meagan Jordan identify four dimensions of equity, which are used here: access, procedural fairness, quality, and outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

- **Access** to services refers to features such as the accessibility of buildings and transportation facilities, and access to appropriate technology.
- **Procedural fairness** refers to the way decisions are made about capital improvements and how services are delivered. One dimension of procedural fairness is the involvement of residents in the decision-making process.
- **Quality** refers to the condition and caliber of the capital and the services they provide.
- **Outcome** comprises a performance approach to measure how well a program is meeting the equity goals.

The CIPs (or budget/financial plans) of these cities were searched using keywords reflecting the four dimensions of equity: equity, equitable, fair, fairness, distribution, access, and outcome. While there is no requirement to produce a CIP, most cities do. Of the 25 cities examined here, 21 mentioned one or more of these keywords in their plan, departmental budgets, or financial plans.

The CIPs were categorized at different levels of activity based on the number of mentions of the key words and the importance of the context in which they are mentioned. Cities categorized as "low" limited their mention of these keywords to one or two departments. Those categorized as "medium" mentioned more than two departments or included some of these keywords as part of a major CIP goal. And the cities categorized as "high" mentioned these keywords many times and incorporated equity as one of their major goals.

## Access

Many of the cities referenced accessibility in specific service areas affected by handicapped access and/or compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Commonly mentioned services where access was a priority were libraries, sidewalks, emergency housing, transit, and parks and recreation. Some cities had a broader application of access, including services such as cycling, beaches, education, art, and the internet.

For example, the City of Portland, Oregon, established a parks local option levy by referendum that funds park services and recreation programs to "center equity and affordable access for all."

## Procedural fairness

Procedural fairness was mentioned in only four cities: Denver, Colorado; New York, New York; San Diego, California; and

San Francisco, California. The City of New York’s CIP provided a strong statement stressing community involvement: “Community perspectives are a core input source for capital planning and decision making, and the city is committed to ensuring New Yorkers have the tools they need to better shape capital investment decisions. City agencies continue to strengthen community outreach and improve how the city integrates public feedback into the planning process, from project conception to design and construction.”

The City and County of Denver received input from more than 10,000 residents on how to improve access to the transportation system. Its goal is that all residents “have access to safe and equitable mobility options.”

### Quality

While quality wasn’t mentioned often in the CIPs, several cities use measures of equity to compare service levels. Some cities use geographical analysis to compare service level quality by location. In the City of Los Angeles, California, equity evaluation scores were calculated for each project. Projects are evaluated based on their impact, using a social impact statement. For single-site projects, a Measure of Access, Disparity, and Equity (MADE) index is calculated to score projects based on geographical

location. Multi-site projects are evaluated based on their benefit to communities in need or their strategy to address disparities. This information can help decision makers assess the variation in infrastructure by location, and therefore service quality.

Similarly, the City of San Jose, California, developed an index of comparative equity measurement to prioritize paving projects. For parks and recreation, it used GIS to “identify areas of need based on factors like health indicators, race, and income.” The City of San Diego uses service level standards (SLS) to compare desired service quality to service performance. The SLS set a baseline for infrastructure needs related to “quality, quantity, reliability, equitable access, responsiveness, or environmental impacts.” The City of Charlotte, North Carolina, and the City of Portland both score transportation projects based on criteria such as safety, equity, race, ethnicity, and income. The Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee, uses the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) in scoring communities for its Walk’n’Bike Master Plan.

### Outcomes

In several cities, equitable outcomes were one of the major goals of the CIP. For example, one of the factors used in

project selection for the City of Chicago, Illinois, was “equitable investment distribution with the goal of addressing long underserved communities.” In the City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, one of the major criteria for project selection was to “create opportunities and reduce barriers to the improvement of outcomes for historically marginalized communities.”

Similarly, in the City of Los Angeles, one of five primary criteria for project selection in the CIP was “equitable community and equity impact,” which are defined as “projects that contribute toward economic development and/or promote social equity to benefit ‘priority communities’—those with low-income households, low community engagement, and low mobility or lack of access to transportation systems.” The City of Seattle, Washington, the City and County of Denver and the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County also included equity as a major goal in their CIPs.

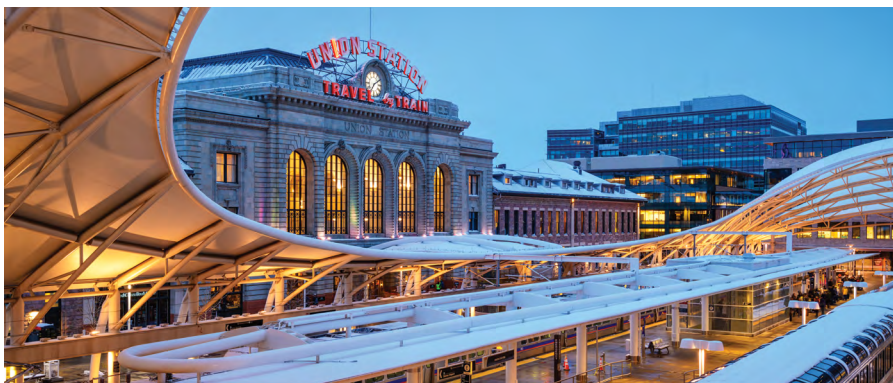
Some cities paired affordability with economic growth to call for more equitable economic growth. These included the City of Charlotte, the City of New York, and the City of Philadelphia.

Equity goals or measures were present in the departments of some cities, but not all. For example, the City of Houston, Texas, Police Department’s mission statement strives to “provide superior and equitable services to improve the quality of community and work life for all citizens.” The public library had a similar equity statement in the Houston CIP.

### Exemplary practices

Some exemplary practices deserve mention.

The City of San Diego’s focus was long-term and systemic: “CIP programming is intended to prioritize equity across communities, continuously produce equal and equitable outcomes, and ultimately eliminate structurally excluded communities. Equity results from eliminating institutional racism and systemic disparities, providing everyone with equitable access to



The City of Denver’s transportation system reflects its commitment to procedural fairness, shaped by input from more than 10,000 residents to ensure all communities enjoy safe, accessible mobility.

opportunity and resources to thrive, no matter where they live.”

The City of San Jose attempts to “pose explicit questions of equity—including who benefits and who is burdened—when considering changes to city services to achieve a balanced budget.”

Both the City of Seattle and City of San Jose identified alternative service delivery as a way to advance equity. A goal of the Seattle Department of Transportation is to partner with neighborhoods to “build a racially equitable and socially just transportation system.”

The City and County of San Francisco combines equity goals with resilience goals: “Taking care of our capital infrastructure is an important part of building a resilient city. Resilience includes eliminating racial and social disparities so that all San Franciscans may recover and thrive, no matter the shocks and stresses they face. The Capital Plan strives to fund projects that address racial and social disparities and promote equity in the services delivered by the city’s facilities and infrastructure.”

The Portland Bureau of Transportation has a strong statement pledging to use a “transportation justice framework, equity lens, and anti-racist practices to deliver and maintain reliable services for historically underserved communities.” They strive for specific strategies to achieve equity, clarity about racism and inequities, and unity among institutionally oppressed people.

## Conclusions

Several lessons were learned from this study. For the most part, the focus on equity in these CIPs was voluntary. Except for the ADA, there was no mention of other federal laws compelling these equity-focused guidelines, other than specific federal grants two cities (the City of Phoenix and the City of Portland) had received. Instead, they are policy choices made by the cities and their constituents. One approach would be to let policy develop from the bottom up rather than the top down.



The City of San Diego, California, is recognized for a Capital Improvement Program that prioritizes equity and ensures all neighborhoods have fair access to infrastructure and opportunity.

Goals need to be operationalized, and measures need to be created to assess progress toward equity goals. These measures should then be used to prioritize capital projects.

The famous saying, “what gets measured gets done,” remains relevant. Goals need to be operationalized, and measures need to be created to assess progress toward equity goals. These measures should then be used to prioritize capital projects. The quality indicators that some cities use, such as GIS data, the CDC’s SVI index, or locally developed measures to rank proposed capital projects, are a strong way of ensuring that selected projects help achieve equity goals.

Policies regarding community outreach and resident participation are uneven. Only four cities in our sample specifically mentioned efforts to involve residents in the CIP process as a part of their equity efforts. While there is no guarantee that including residents in the process will lead to more equitable outcomes, participation itself can democratize the process.

Dimensions of equity other than racial equity may be relevant. Only three cities (City of Charlotte, City of San Jose, and the City of Seattle) made explicit references to gender equity. In some communities, equity issues are more about class and ethnicity than race. On the other hand, disability is mentioned

in many of the CIPs in part because of the ADA, suggesting that federal laws can have an important effect on decisions about CIPs.

Finally, public capital investments have an important effect on spatial economic development. If CIPs do not consider differences in neighborhoods that vary by race, ethnicity, class, and income, differences in infrastructure and service quality among neighborhoods can last for years. ❏

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<sup>1</sup> *Best Practices: Capital Asset Management*, GFOA, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The largest 25 US cities, per the 2020 Census, are: Austin, Texas; Boston, Massachusetts; Charlotte, North Carolina; Chicago, Illinois; Columbus, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; El Paso, Texas; Fort Worth, Texas; Houston, Texas; Indianapolis, Indiana; Jacksonville, Florida; Los Angeles, California; Nashville, Tennessee; New York, New York; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Phoenix, Arizona; Portland, Oregon; San Antonio, Texas; San Diego, California; San Francisco, California; San Jose, California; Seattle, Washington; and Las Vegas, Nevada.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce D. McDonald III and Sean McCandless, “Incorporating Social Equity,” in Bruce D. McDonald III and Meagan M. Jordan, *Teaching Public Budgeting and Finance: A Practical Guide* (Routledge, 2022).

For additional resources on equity in public finance, please visit GFOA’s Equity Resource Page.

[gfoa.org/equity](https://www.gfoa.org/equity)