

MUNICIPAL EQUITY POLICIES: TAKEAWAYS FOR PLANNERS

By Tessa Williams and Victoria Barr

SUMMARY

Canadian municipalities are creating policies to guide their approach to equity, both internally within governments and externally across communities. Planners possess both the power and responsibility to contribute to municipal equity efforts, as evidenced by the profession's record of harming marginalized communities, through discriminatory design, disinvestment, displacement and disenfranchisement. However, this is a new area for many planners, and there are different ways to approach equity work. This article shares early findings from an environmental scan of equity policies in Canadian communities, and suggests takeaways for planning practice.

SOMMAIRE

Les municipalités canadiennes créent des politiques pour guider leur approche s à l'équité, tant à l'intérieur des gouvernements qu'à l'extérieur des collectivités. Les urbanistes ont à la fois le pouvoir et la responsabilité de contribuer aux efforts municipaux en matière d'équité, comme le prouve le bilan de la profession en matière de préjudice aux communautés marginalisées, par le biais de la conception discriminatoire, du désinvestissement, du déplacement et de la privation de droits. Cependant, il s'agit d'un domaine nouveau pour de nombreux urbanistes, et il existe différentes façons d'aborder le travail sur l'équité. Cet article présente les premiers résultats d'une analyse de l'environnement des politiques d'équité dans les collectivités canadiennes et propose des pistes de réflexion pour la pratique de l'urbanisme.

“OUR FIELD IS RIFE WITH CAUTIONARY TALES OF INEQUITABLE DECISION-MAKING, FROM HOGAN’S ALLEY TO AFRICVILLE. SOME COMMUNITIES HAVE BEEN DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED, INCLUDING RACIALIZED PEOPLE, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, PEOPLE WITH LOW INCOMES, AND LGBTQIA2S+ PEOPLE.”

Looking forward, the planning profession must explore new approaches to redress past harm and prevent future harm. Our field is rife with cautionary tales of inequitable decision-making, from Hogan’s Alley to Africville. Some communities have been disproportionately impacted, including racialized people, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, people with low incomes, and LGBTQIA2S+ people. However, as noted by the American Planning Association, “if

planners’ toolboxes can be used to exclude, limit, and segregate, then the same tools and regulatory frameworks can be used to implement policies that result in fair, equitable communities.”¹

Municipalities – as landholders, employers, regulators, service providers, and conveners – hold unique capacity to advance, or undermine, equity.² However, municipal decisions are the result of many people, from elected officials to consultants to planners, each bringing their own approach to equity work. The absence of

local guidance about how to identify and address equity can lead to a piecemeal approach, missed considerations, and further harm.

Municipal equity policies can help planners use their power, as technical experts entrusted with appraising the public interest, for good. These policies signal that equity is a municipal priority. They challenge municipalities to ask essential questions: what does equity mean to us? How do we know if we are making progress, or doing harm? Thus, the process





of putting together an equity policy is part of the learning – it offers an opportunity for education and broader engagement among staff and community.

However, creating an equity policy is just the first step: these policies must be supported with thoughtful, sustained action. Some municipalities were early adopters and are already in action, but many others are wondering where to start. We completed an environmental scan of equity policies in Canadian municipalities and summarized our early findings in this article to help planners understand emerging patterns and opportunities in this growing policy area. We acknowledge that our privilege means we lack the lived experience of planners from marginalized communities, and welcome critiques of our work.

Using snowball sampling and crowdsourcing, we identified 22 cities with policies that considered equity broadly both across the community and within the municipal organization. We did not focus on policies limited to internal government affairs, a single priority population, or that included equity as part of a larger policy goal (such as an Official Plan). We selected a shortlist of eight cities (Edmonton, Halifax, Montreal, New Westminster, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Vancouver, and Victoria) based on regional representation, size, and the city’s reputation for taking action on equity. We read these policies critically and developed six suggested takeaways for practice. Tables 1 and 2 show examples of how these takeaways appear in policy documents.

STARTING POINTS VARY

Some policies, such as Vancouver and Victoria, focused on the why, building a clear rationale for intentionally integrating equity into municipal affairs. Other policies, such as Halifax and Saskatoon, concentrated on the how, providing detailed guidance on evaluating the equity impacts of projects and creating department-level EDI action plans. We were concerned that action taken without a clear rationale and shared understanding of equity could result in further harm.

Takeaway: *Be clear about your vision – start with the why before moving to the how.*

Early Finding	Policy Excerpt
Starting Points Vary	The Equity Framework is not an action plan. It is a conceptual, grounding, foundational document, out of which a number of toolkits and action plans flow, and from which ongoing departmental strategies will be drawn going forward. p.4
Source: Vancouver, 2021 “Getting our house in order: The City of Vancouver Equity Framework” https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/equity-framework.pdf	
Measurement Comes Next	To ensure diverse voices are brought forward, the process of collecting and analyzing data for monitoring and evaluation processes also needs to incorporate an equity lens, using a combination of quantitative data (surveys, statistics) and qualitative data (stories, comments, ideas). Throughout this process, it is important that the focus remains on developing respectful and compassionate relationships with individuals and communities, before and after data collection and analysis. p.22.
Source: New Westminster, 2022 “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism Framework” https://pub-newwestcity.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=10832	
Questions as Equity Lenses	Who is not included in the work you do? What could contribute to this exclusion? What can you do differently to ensure inclusion? p.19
Source: Ottawa, 2018 “Equity & Inclusion Lens Handbook” www.ottawa.ca/en/city-hall/creating-equal-inclusive-and-diverse-city/equity-and-inclusion-lens	

Table 1: Early Findings & Policy Excerpts

Early Finding	Policy Excerpt
Language Matters	Both diversity and inclusion are also important when embedding equity. However, they are not able to tackle the dismantling of systems of oppression that equity gets us to. Equity is the foundation of the Equity Framework; diversity and inclusion support equitable outcomes. p.7
Source: Victoria, 2022 “Equity Framework” https://pub-victoria.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=81069	
Local Context Lacking	Introduced in 1933, Zoning Bylaw 26 was Edmonton's first set of land use regulations. Premised on a western view of land management, it impacted and resulted in the displacement of many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, including the Enoch and the Papaschase. p.6
Source: Edmonton, 2021 “GBA+ & Equity Toolkit Story Document” https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/urban_planning_and_design/equity-and-the-zoning-bylaw	
Supporting Reconciliation	The starting point for this Framework is the assertion that the ongoing colonialism faced by the Host Nations and urban Indigenous people is unique and separate from the oppression that other equity-denied groups face. At the same time, there are some common root causes for these inequities. The efforts toward Reconciliation and equity can inform one another, and solidarity between Indigenous people and equity-denied communities can be beneficial to both. p.3
Source: Vancouver, 2021 “Getting our house in order: The City of Vancouver’s Equity Framework” www.vancouver.ca/files/cov/equity-framework.pdf	

Table 2: Early Findings & Policy Excerpts cont’d



MUNICIPAL EQUITY POLICIES

MEASUREMENT COMES NEXT

Most policies recognized that measuring equity was vital, but decided to pursue measurement separately. Some policies provided helpful guidance on the future development of indicators, highlighting the need for disaggregated data, a combination of both quantitative data and qualitative data that captures the lived experience of marginalized people, and cautions against perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Takeaway: *Think about equity when designing indicators so that the process itself doesn't cause harm.*

QUESTIONS AS EQUITY LENSES

Three of eight policies reviewed included reflexive questions intended to help staff identify inequities in their work. These were often packaged as “checklists” for different activities, from engagement to monitoring. While questions can be an effective tool for identifying problems, this approach lacks accountability because there is no way to tell if inequities are addressed. We thought equity lens outcomes could be shared in staff reports or budget requests, to improve transparency.

Takeaway: *Share equity lens outcomes with decision makers and community members.*

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Some policies used language to signal a stronger commitment to equity. Policies that discussed concepts such as anti-racism, White Supremacy, and decolonization demonstrated a willingness

to confront systems of power, whereas policies that relied on terms such as diversity, inclusion, and belonging suggested a reluctance to go there.

Takeaway: *Be explicit when naming power systems that contribute to inequity.*

LOCAL CONTEXT LACKING

Every community's history is unique, but often past inequities aren't widely known. Most policies described the local context at a high level and we felt this was a missed opportunity for education. Alternatively, Ottawa developed data-driven profiles of priority populations to highlight relevant issues, and Edmonton compiled a resource of historical negative externalities resulting from zoning. Such types of content can recognize the lived experience of marginalized people, demonstrate the impacts of structural inequity, and help staff prioritize equity efforts.

Takeaway: *Inequities do not manifest in a vacuum; therefore, equity policies must reflect the local context.*

SUPPORTING RECONCILIATION

Vancouver and New Westminster explicitly described the relationship between the equity policy and the municipality's work towards Reconciliation. These policies acknowledged the need for a distinct approach due to the unique oppression experienced by Indigenous people. We thought this was a wise practice that was not addressed in the other policies.

Takeaway: *Equity policies can support but not replace Reconciliation work.*

EXPECT MORE EQUITY POLICIES

Our work offers a snapshot of this evolving policy space, and we expect more municipalities will create equity policies by the time this article is published. However, equity policies are just one tool, and must be viewed as the starting point, not the finish line. Planners are uniquely positioned to contribute to municipal equity efforts; therefore, we urge planners to prioritize exploring new approaches to redress and prevent harm. The more of us who commit to this learning journey together, the better the profession will be equipped to solve complex problems and co-create a sustainable, equitable future.

REFERENCES

- 1 American Planning Association, “Planning for Equity: Policy Guide,” 2019, 5.
- 2 “Getting Our House in Order: The City of Vancouver's Equity Framework,” 2021, 24.

Tessa Williams, RPP, MCIP is a research assistant at Simon Fraser University with professional planning experience in Ontario and Nova Scotia. She contributes to the Cities, Health, and Active Transportation Research Lab.

Victoria Barr, PhD is Principal at LevelUp Planning Collaborative Inc., a consulting firm that helps communities build health and equity into their policies and practices. She has 25 years of experience as a planner, advocate and researcher, including work developing equity policies with municipalities. ■



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