

# Portland: Closing the racial justice gap through building policy

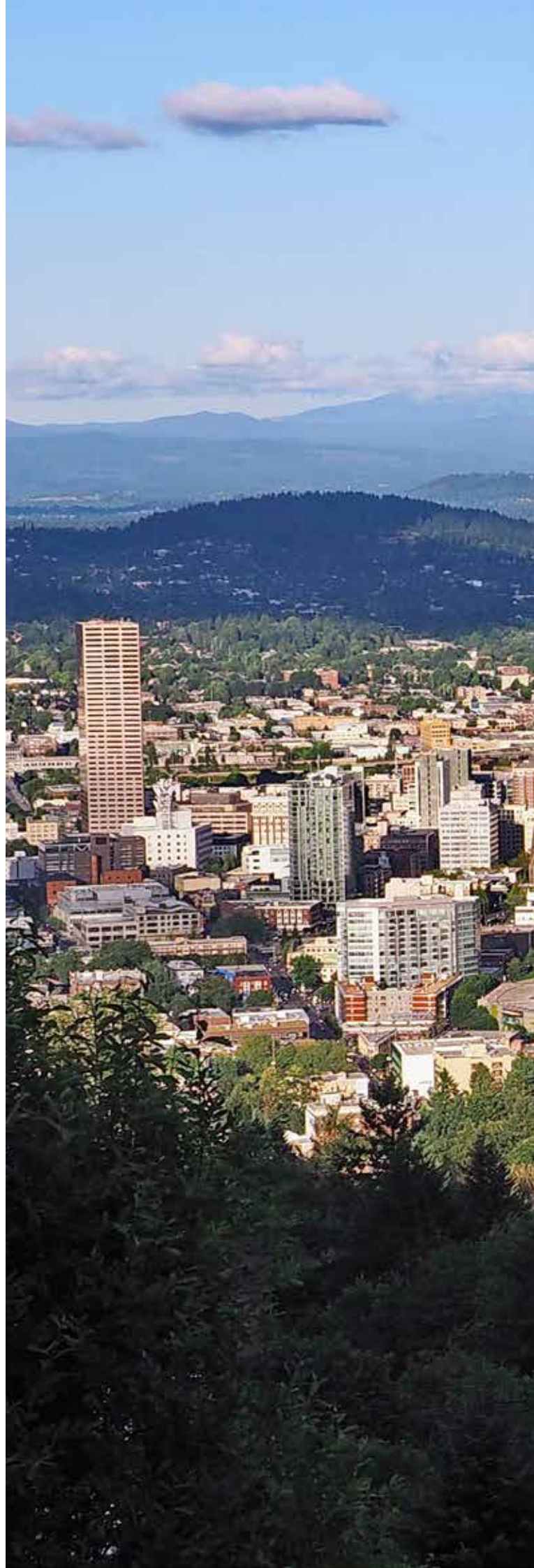
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**The City of Portland has an ambitious commitment to be fossil-free by 2050 through its 100% Renewable Energy Resolution**, and the city is also a signatory to the C40 Net Zero Carbon Buildings Declaration. To achieve these goals, the city developed a building decarbonization policy roadmap with a deeper level of social inclusion. Black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities have historically been underrepresented in climate policy processes. To close this racial justice gap, Portland followed a community-led engagement model, the Zero Cities Project, that the city co-created with community partners to elevate the voices and decision-making power of BIPOC communities.









## The Zero Cities Project Model

The Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) funded the Zero Cities Project to support eleven U.S. cities in the development of actionable and equitable pathways to achieve zero net carbon in the built environment by 2050.

Inspired by the Movement Strategy Center (MSC) and Facilitating Power tool, The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, Portland's participation in the Zero Cities Project was also driven by the following goals:

- Change the power dynamic of previous stakeholder engagement to give more decision-making power to BIPOC communities, who are at the front line of climate change.
- Move beyond the status quo and build a new policy development process within the city that contributes to dismantling systemic, institutional racism.
- Create a sustainable transformation pathway that is built on diversity and therefore more resilient to political and societal shifts.



- Collaborate with BIPOC communities on building energy and climate policy that includes diverse representation.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership charts a pathway to transform and strengthen local democracies, and aims to build thriving and diverse communities through deep participation, particularly by communities commonly excluded from democratic voice and power. This tool shifts community engagement away from BIPOC tokenization to ownership over the process.

Portland's Zero Cities Community Forum invited Black, Indigenous and people of color to share their community wisdom and needs for equitable building energy policy. Photo credit: City of Portland

## Overcoming Broken Trust & Barriers to the Inclusive Policy Process

The City of Portland and State of Oregon have a long history of institutional racism and exclusion of BIPOC communities in policy development. The Zero Cities Project was an opportunity for the city to repair broken trust and co-create a new model for community-led engagement.

This process started with MSC developing a Social Ecosystem Map, a spreadsheet with a list of over 100 community-based organizations that work at the nexus of advancing racial equity, environmental justice and sustainability in Portland. MSC recommended six local, non-profit organizations as community partners that had already been organizing together through a climate justice collaborative. MSC also recommended one of these six organizations, Verde, as an anchor partner based on their climate justice leadership in Portland and capacity to engage in the project. The city cultivated partnerships with community organizations recommended by MSC and requested their participation in the Zero Cities Project.

Following Verde's lead, the city and community partners hosted a 2-day

Energy Training Session to build capacity and collective understanding of energy use in the built environment. The training session also explored the intersection of advancing racial equity and decarbonizing the building sector using an Equity Assessment Tool developed by another Zero Cities Project equity consultant, Race Forward. Training session participants joined additional community members to form a Participatory Action Research (PAR) team. PAR is a model of community organizing that builds the capacity of people on the front line of a problem to take leadership in creating the change they want. In December 2019, the PAR team hosted an all-day, all-BIPOC Community Forum on Buildings and Energy.



The Zero Cities Participatory Action Research Team established a model for community-led engagement and decision-making in Portland's future climate policy development. Photo credit: City of Portland

# Lessons Learned & What Changed as a Result of Community-led Engagement

Through the Zero Cities community-led engagement, the city learned new methods for climate policy development from community partners on how to overcome historic barriers to BIPOC decision-making power in previous policy engagement.

the city engaged with 50 new BIPOC community members through the Zero Cities community forum. This community-led engagement model enabled the City to rebuild trust and partner in a way that honors community wisdom and priorities.

Previous BIPOC Policy Experience	New Methods for Policy Development
Technical knowledge valued over community wisdom	Treating community members as consultants and valuing their lived experience
Community time is not valued – monetarily and expertise	Paying people a good rate for their consultation
Lack of accessibility of information, knowledge, influence and process	Accessibility resources – translation/ interpretation, childcare and food
Community engagement tokenizing at end of policy development	Continuing a holistic process from information gathering through policy development
People left feeling disempowered	Reinforcing and valuing self-determination
Decision-making ultimately shuts out those who are most impacted	Centering those most impacted
Processes move at the speed of politics	Moving at the speed of trust

The Zero Cities Project also led to new insights and changes in how the City of Portland prioritizes climate policy and approaches community and stakeholder engagement:

- **New BIPOC representation:** In addition to developing relationships with community partners and the PAR team,

- **New focus on rental properties:** The city learned that energy costs are a major concern to tenants who are renting houses and apartments. However, tenants are unlikely to request energy efficiency upgrades due to a fear of landlords raising rents which can lead to housing displacement and cultural gentrification. Thanks to BIPOC community input, the city looked at rental energy consumption in more detail and learned that 20% of the city’s carbon emissions are from rentals.

- **New energy cost burden focus:** As part of the approach to look at data differently, the city developed a new energy cost burden map to visualize average income spent on energy bills. This exercise demonstrated that Portland’s most economically vulnerable BIPOC communities are also the most energy cost burdened. However, the map does not capture the lived experience of low-income tenants who are severely energy cost burdened.

- **New ways of analyzing data:** The city has broadened its climate policy focus on carbon and energy metrics to include the qualitative analysis of community experience. The result is prioritization of policies that deliver climate justice benefits to BIPOC communities.

- **New policy recommendation as part of the process:** The City learned that residents want minimum rental efficiency standards delivered in a way that reduces energy cost burden but will not raise rents nor lead to displacement.

## Convergence of environmental and social impacts

After completing the Zero Cities Project in Spring 2020, the PAR team continued its own community organizing under a new identity, Build/Shift: Building Community/Shifting Power (Build/Shift). The Build/Shift Collaborative pivoted to three compounding crises in 2020:

- **Political and social unrest:** With the results of the 2016 presidential election and ongoing injustices against Black victims in the US, Portland became home to some of the biggest social unrest in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd.
- **Covid-19 pandemic:** The public health crisis demonstrated that communities of color have an increased risk of Covid-19 health impacts.
- **Environmental hazards and wildfire season:** Wildfires in Oregon have been increasing in frequency and strength over the years, including extremely poor air quality and negative health impacts in Portland in September 2020.

The events of 2020 rapidly amplified the importance of inclusion and diversity. Portland,

like many cities in the Western United States, experienced a trifecta of wildfires, political and social unrest and impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic.

In 2021, the City of Portland and Build/Shift community partners have secured additional funding to continue policy development based on community-led engagement model and recommendations from the Zero Cities Project. Specifically, they are collaborating on Building Performance Standards (BPS), a policy that improves existing homes and buildings through a climate, equity and public health lens. For this BPS policy development process, the city is working with BIPOC communities as the first stakeholder group because of the historic lack of representation of these groups in climate policy decision-making processes. Based on Build/Shift recommendations, the City plans to collect input from additional stakeholder groups such as property owners, affordable housing developers and utilities, as the second phase. This will help Portland develop policy that doesn't just solve for carbon but also community needs, such as displacement of residents due to increased rents and energy cost burden.

## Resources

- [USDN Zero Cities Project report](#)
- [Verde Zero Cities Portland Report](#)
- [Movement Strategy Center and Facilitating Power Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership Tool](#)
- [Race Forward Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit](#)

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### Lead Author:

Paulina Lis, *C40 Technical Advisor, Private Buildings Efficiency*

### Co-Produced with:

Vinh Mason, *City of Portland Senior Energy Policy Advisor*

### Edited by:

Christopher Horn, *C40 Senior Manager, Regional Communications*

Emily Bickle, *C40 Climate Solutions & Networks Team Officer*

Frankie Downy, *C40 Programme Manager, Private Building Efficiency*

### Designers:

Rié Hirai, *C40 Head of Creative Content*

Christopher Horn, *C40 Senior Manager, Regional Communications*



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