REVERSING COMPLETE STREETS DISPARITIES

Portland’s Community Watershed Stewardship Program

Erin Goodling and Cameron Herrington

Introduction

For a decade, Pacific Northwest rains regularly flooded St. Mary Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Portland, Oregon. Even after spending several thousand dollars in an attempt to repair the dry-well system in the parking lot, the small, immigrant-led congregation had to use sandbags and pumps to keep stormwater out of its converted warehouse church. Out of money, St. Mary decided to pursue a different approach. After months of planning and preparation, dozens of volunteers arrived on a sunny Saturday morning in summer 2013 with jackhammers, crowbars, shovels, and gloves. The volunteers worked with church members to remove 1,500 square feet of asphalt from the church’s parking lot, “depaving” the way for a bioswale, a vegetated stormwater drain. After a contractor excavated the area and brought in new soil, volunteers returned to add hundreds of native plants that would soak up the parking lot’s runoff and prevent future flooding. Time will tell, but church leaders report that the building has so far stayed dry after heavy fall rains.

St. Mary’s congregation carried out this project with funding and technical assistance from the Community Watershed Stewardship Program (CWSP), a small program in the City of Portland’s Bureau of Environmental Services (BES). Established in 1995, CWSP provides grants of up to $10,000 to community groups that take on projects that improve watershed health and manage stormwater. In this sense, CWSP sits at the nexus of two hallmarks of Portland’s progressive ethos: environmental stewardship and civic engagement.

In this chapter, we draw on the example of CWSP to explain how the Complete Streets agenda in particular, and sustainability governance more broadly, may provide space for city planners and leaders to prioritize the needs of underrepresented groups. But in contrast to common sustainability claims (Wheeler and Beatley 2004), we assert that environmentally themed initiatives will not inherently
result in equitable outcomes. Absent a focus on equity, sustainability and Complete Streets initiatives also produce inComplete Streets—those spaces both physical and socio-political in which “sustainability” and “Complete Streets” agendas fail to deliver on their social equity promises.

We highlight a handful of strategies that CWSP has employed to overtly prioritize social equity as part of its watershed health mission, and draw on the concept of equity planning to discuss ways that CWSP’s experience might inform other environmental programs that aim to operationalize a social equity agenda through sustainability/Complete Streets programs. Our aim in this chapter is neither to thoroughly evaluate the specific approach that CWSP has taken, nor judge it against an alternative set of equity strategies. Instead, we discuss CWSP’s equity focus as one example of how a municipal bureaucracy tasked with implementing a sustainability/Complete Streets agenda has intentionally sought to redress systemic disparities, rather than reproducing them.

Following this introduction, we describe the context in which CWSP operates, both locally in Portland and more generally in terms of “sustainable city” governance. Next, we summarize CWSP’s modus operandi for its first 15 years, arguing that the program typified mainstream urban sustainability practice in that it assumed its community-led model would automatically result in “win-win-win” (Vos 2007) outcomes for economic development, environmental improvement, and social equity. We then problematize this mainstream understanding of sustainability, highlighting some of the shortcomings of an uncritical, ahistorical, de-politicized approach. Next, we turn to interviews with CWSP employees and others closely tied to the program to describe how it has recently come to more purposefully prioritize social equity. Finally, we outline some concrete strategies that CWSP has used to simultaneously improve watershed health and explicitly address the needs and desires of underrepresented groups.

Throughout our summary of CWSP’s approach, we draw on Norman Krumholz’s (1982) concept of equity planning to assert that bureaucrats and planners do in fact have agency to pursue equity agendas within urban sustainability and Complete Streets frameworks, at least in some circumstances. We caution, however, that isolated efforts have limited efficacy unless they are supported by—or inspire the development of—an institutional commitment to equity analysis and program reform. Indeed, overt equity objectives seeded in small programs such as CWSP can serve as catalysts, eventually trickling up to higher levels of governance and out to other programs and cities. We hope that, by shining a light on the evolution of CWSP’s equity focus and describing some of its concrete tactics, we might provide planners and other leaders with inspiration and the foundations of a strategic approach to a more just sustainability (Agyeman 2005, 2013).

Portland, Oregon: model sustainable city?

Sustainability has been a dominant policy-making paradigm since the early 1990s, and municipal governments and city planning agencies often use the sustainability
framework to articulate tripartite goals of economic growth, environmental quality, and social equity (Portney 2005; Gunder 2006; Krueger and Gibbs 2007). One iteration of this three-pronged sustainability approach is the “Complete Streets” ideal. Advocates of Complete Streets policies emphasize the need for roadways to cater to all users, not just drivers. They promote Complete Streets as smart investments that increase safety and make thoroughfares more “walkable” and welcoming, environmentally-friendly, and amenable to business (National Complete Streets Coalition 2013).

In Portland, Oregon, Complete Streets and watershed stewardship go hand-in-hand. Recognizing that streets serve as conduits not only for automobiles and bicycles, but also for polluted stormwater runoff, over the last decade BES has installed thousands of “green street” bioswales in the public right-of-way. Combined with other stormwater management facilities, this green system can reduce non-point source pollution. By allowing runoff from streets, parking lots, and other impervious surfaces to slowly infiltrate into soil onsite (see Figure 10.1), bioswales in some parts of the city help divert runoff from Portland’s combined sewer pipes, which overflow into the city’s waterways when the system exceeds capacity. In other areas, they act as a buffer to help prevent pollutants from going directly into creeks.

Portland’s green street facilities have also made roadways more pedestrian- and bike-friendly by narrowing streets, slowing traffic, and creating buffers between cars

FIGURE 10.1 Portland bioswale

Source: Authors.
and people. Swales line many of Portland’s designated “bicycle boulevards,” which are a key ingredient of the city’s implicit Complete Streets agenda. Though the specific phrase “Complete Streets” is not widely used by Portland’s planners and municipal leaders, the city’s push to create “20-minute neighborhoods” derives from the same sustainability/livability ethos that motivates the Complete Streets movement, and has contributed to Portland’s reputation as one of the world’s most progressive, livable cities (Seltzer 2004; SustainLane 2008) (Figure 10.2).

This green approach to planning and urban governance has translated into an economic growth strategy for Portland, attracting investors, businesses, tourists, and well-educated migrants (Jurjevich and Schrock 2012). Jonas and While (2007, p.129) suggest that the “new urban politics” is “as much about sustainability as it is about urban competition.” Susan Anderson, City of Portland Planning Director, echoes this sentiment:

We’re not doing [sustainability] just to be altruistic. Part of the reason we’re doing a lot of this: there’s money to be made, to be crass . . . And most of these things are things we want to do to create better, healthier places anyway – but by doing that, you create a place where people want to live and have businesses.

(quoted in Minow-Smith 2012)

Yet, while city officials, environmentalists, and eco-conscious consumers laud Portland’s bike lanes and bioswales, eco-districts and electric cars, others perceive Complete Streets planning and its associated rhetoric of sustainability and livability as an evasion of messy political questions and direct engagement with social justice concerns. Cassie Cohen, executive director of Groundwork Portland, an

![FIGURE 10.2 Mural depicting Portland’s Complete Streets-oriented neighborhoods.](image)

Lead artist: Sara Stout.

Source: Authors.
environmental justice non-profit organization that has received CWSP grants in recent years, explains:

A lot of folks in positions of power in environmental groups pride themselves on having the city ranked highly — as a bikeable city, having lots of trees, certain parks, [and] MAX [light rail] lines. But it’s been a convenient way for people to overlook the fact that they’ve kept out and isolated an entire group of Portlanders in the process of recognizing the city for these things. It leaves out communities that don’t get to reap the benefits of the resources.

(Interview, 25 October 2013)

Indeed, Complete Streets in some Portland neighborhoods are the correlates of in Complete Streets in others. Despite numerous accolades, not all of Portland’s roughly 600,000 residents have regular access to neighborhood grocery stores, convenient public transit, parks, and streets made complete by sidewalks and crosswalks, bike lanes, and native plant bioswales (Curry-Stevens et al. 2010; Griffin-Valade et al. 2010; CLF 2013). And as in other U.S. cities (Hackworth 2007; McClintock 2011), Portland’s disparities are both racial and spatial in nature. Over the last two decades, 82nd Avenue has been a fulcrum on which the demographics of poverty and race have shifted and rebalanced: to the west, the city has become more affluent and white; to the east, more diverse and poor. Rising property values and an incoming wave of wealthier, mainly white residents have displaced many lower-income households—especially African-Americans—from formerly redlined inner Portland neighborhoods (Gibson 2007; Bates 2013).

These same neighborhoods now constitute the epicenter of Complete Streets-oriented redevelopment, with walkable business districts, bike lanes, and a new light rail line. In contrast, many displaced African-Americans have joined refugee, immigrant, and working-class white populations in “the numbers” (east of 82nd Avenue), where there are substantially fewer Complete Streets amenities and a disproportionate number of high-crash traffic corridors (City of Portland 2013) (Figure 10.3).

To borrow the title of China Miéville’s (2011) novel, 82nd Avenue now serves as a visceral demarcation line between “the city and the city.” The media, local politicians, and scholars alike regularly refer to the existence of “two Portlands,” a concept that rhetorically conjoins the city’s spatial, racial, and cultural divides (Curry-Stevens et al. 2010; Mirk 2010; Pein 2011; City of Portland 2013). One Portland is the predominantly white, well-off, eco-conscious city depicted in the sketch comedy show Portlandia and celebrated by the New York Times (Scalza 2012). The “other Portland” (Pein 2011) includes the city’s communities of color, lower-income residents, and immigrants. Gaps in income, home-ownership, education, and employment between whites and Portlanders of color are growing; by almost any measure, members of this other Portland are less likely than the city’s more affluent, well-educated (generally white) residents to influence and benefit from municipal sustainability initiatives (Figure 10.4) (Curry-Stevens et al. 2010; Griffin-Valade et al. 2010, CLF 2013).
FIGURE 10.3 East Portland and other outer neighborhoods are home to far more people of color than Portland’s inner-core neighborhoods, where Complete Streets amenities are concentrated.

Source: Nathan McClintock; data from U.S. Census (2010).

FIGURE 10.4 An example of Portland’s incomplete streets, heavily concentrated in neighborhoods inhabited by low-income residents, people of color, older adults, and children. Guy Dale makes his way up SE 162nd Avenue in East Portland, where it is not uncommon to see wheelchairs having to use roadways to get around.

Source: Darryl James.
Local government has played a well-documented role in creating, exacerbating, and failing to address Portland’s inequalities; acknowledging as much is now part-and-parcel of Portland’s political rhetoric (Mirk 2010; City of Portland 2013; Law 2013). Organizations representing communities of color and low-income residents, however, have begun to advance their critique by explicitly drawing a connection between public investments in the sustainability branded revitalization of inner neighborhoods—streetcars, bike lanes, bioswales—and the dearth of investment, services, and even basic infrastructure in the numbers. “We have *Portlandia* and *Poorlandia* . . . We care more about bikes than people,” states Kayse Jama (Panel discussion, 30 May 2013), executive director of Portland’s Center for Intercultural Organizing.

It is in this context that CWSP has recently begun to push back against the inequities of Portland’s sustainability politics and practices by explicitly prioritizing the needs of communities with histories of dispossession and displacement.

### Community Watershed Stewardship Program: the early years

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Portland’s heavy rains regularly overwhelmed the city’s infrastructure and caused combined sewer overflows (CSOs) of raw sewage into the Willamette River and Columbia Slough. This contamination was the result of an antiquated system that channeled sanitary sewage and stormwater runoff into the same set of underground pipes. In 1991, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Oregon’s Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) mandated that the city clean up the mess.

BES responded with a three-pronged approach, resulting in a 99 percent reduction of CSOs into the Willamette and a 94 percent reduction into the Columbia. First, BES tunneled under the city to install the recently completed “big pipe,” which has dramatically increased physical capacity for conveying sewage to a treatment facility. Second, it invested in a variety of green infrastructure measures, designed to soak rainwater into the ground and prevent it from entering the combined sewer system in the first place. This strategy has included construction of over a thousand bioswales, rain-gardens, and green streets facilities, and subsidies for eco-roof construction, pavement removal projects, and the disconnection of gutters and downspouts from the combined sewer system (BES 2011). Many of these features have benefits beyond stormwater management, such as traffic-calming and sidewalk beautification, making them congruent with Complete Streets style urban design.

Recognizing that the actions of negligent or uninformed residents could undermine the viability of these innovations, and hoping to create broad buy-in and political support for the Bureau’s efforts, BES adopted community participation and watershed education as the third component of its holistic approach to stormwater management. “You can have great engineering, but if someone puts motor oil into a storm drain, that’s a problem,” explains Jennifer Devlin, CWSP’s program manager (Interview, 25 October 2013). As a centerpiece of BES’
community engagement strategy, CWSP was established as a grant program to fund watershed stewardship efforts such as the clean-up and restoration of streams and natural areas, “upland” projects such as rain-gardens that keep stormwater out of the combined sewer, and educational initiatives that spread the message of Portlanders’ collective responsibility for watershed health (Figure 10.5).

From its inception, CWSP has been a partnership between Portland State University (PSU) and the City of Portland, and for the past decade has hired two graduate students each year to help Devlin coordinate the grant program. These students manage day-to-day operations, serve as liaisons to PSU classes that periodically work with grant recipients to implement projects, and bring innovative ideas (ibid.).

By cost-effectively wedding Portland’s “urban imaginary of nature” (Huber and Currie 2007) with its tradition of neighborhood-based civic participation (Abbott 2001), CWSP embodies the triple bottom-line ideal of sustainability. In the first place, CWSP projects address environmental challenges related to stormwater management. Second, initiatives are fiscally efficient in that they leverage limited funds to attract many times the grants’ value in in-kind donations and volunteer hours. And, third, CWSP projects are community-led. In other words, by setting aside a very small amount of money each year for community-based watershed projects—out of a total BES budget of $239.6 million in FY2013–14, CWSP

FIGURE 10.5 Typical CWSP stream restoration project

Source: Sarah Kidd.
awarded $95,000 in grants—BES efficiently invests not only in its core mission of stormwater management and watershed health, but also in developing communities. Environment, economy, and people: win-win-win.

Questioning the sustainability ‘win-win-win’

Upon being established in 1995, “CWSP legitimized and validated community participation in what had been pretty much a top-down regulatory environment” within BES, recalls PSU professor and CWSP co-founder Barry Messer (Interview, 31 October 2013). Compared to more technical, expert-led approaches to environmental management, CWSP’s community involvement strategy was relatively novel and progressive (Welsch and Heying 1999). But during its first decade, the majority of the program’s grant applications came from environmentally focused, well-connected community groups—mainly representing white, middle-class, west-of-82nd Avenue Portland. Consequently, CWSP awarded almost all of its grants to a relatively narrow swath of neighborhoods and demographic sectors. In short, the program served as a resource for sustainability minded white Portland, and remained largely irrelevant for communities of color and other groups marginalized by the “sustainable city.” This small watershed stewardship grant fund was unintentionally reproducing Portland’s socio-economic—and increasingly spatialized—disparities.

It is well established that “sustainability,” even when pursued with a community participation focus, is not a panacea for social injustice; an undercurrent of class, gender, and race/ethnicity-based conflict around socio-ecological relations persists even in sustainable cities, reflecting starkly disparate outcomes for different groups (Pulido 2000; Krueger and Gibbs 2007; Agyeman 2005, 2013). And in the absence of explicit measures to confront disparities, sustainability and Complete Streets initiatives often reproduce social inequalities, as many chapters in this book show. Jonas and While (2007, p.129) assert, “Even if in some cities attributes of the ‘right’ urban governance for environmental sustainability can be found, they often coexist with neoliberal urban forms that are socially regressive and with which they may be in conflict.”

One key example is the link between green-themed livability and gentrification/displacement, often obscured by sustainability and Complete Streets rhetoric (see Miller and Lubitow, Chapter 14 in this volume). When cities such as Portland invest public funds to “revitalize” neighborhoods with bike lanes, streetcars, and other Complete Streets elements, they seek to attract private development and affluent residents, often at the expense of lower-income households. Unless sustainability initiatives are controlled by vulnerable communities themselves, or are accompanied by anti-displacement strategies, low-income residents are frequently displaced, as property values rise (DeFilippis 2004; Bunce 2009; Quastel 2009).

As this potential for displacement suggests, there is rarely space for serious discussion of who benefits from and who pays for sustainability “improvements” (Agyeman 2005; Krueger and Gibbs 2007; Swyngedouw 2007). Alternative
solutions to socio-environmental challenges are infrequently solicited from those most impacted (see Miller and Lubitow, Chapter 14 in this volume). Moreover, while there may be space to make small adjustments to specific policies or initiatives, there rarely exists space to question the overall sustainable development paradigm, which acquiesces to a political economic system predicated upon economic growth, a circumstance Swyngedouw (2007) refers to as “postpolitical.” Sustainability research and policy instead focus on modifying economic valuation systems to better account for ecological variables, developing quantitative indicators and metrics, and designing technological solutions (e.g. green building practices) (Krueger and Gibbs 2007).

Messer describes the incredible complexity of managing urban stormwater: “[We’re] dealing with an intractable urban environmental challenge like non-point source pollution—run-off—with ill-defined, multiple points of entry” (Interview, 31 October 2013). While technical fixes such as Portland’s big pipe—and even its bioswales—may provide essential services in addressing such complex challenges, they also tend to supplant attention to the socio-ecological processes that come together to produce cities. Ecological variables, such as stormwater and sewage, do not exist in an apolitical world; rather, they become entangled with capital and deep-seated power dynamics, structuring outcomes according to political influence and access to resources (Harvey 1989, 2007; Heynen et al. 2006; Smith 2008).

In the case of Portland’s stormwater and sewage challenge, engineers clearly had much to offer, but they could only address one aspect of the problem as it had been framed. Karyn Hansen, BES engineer and the Bureau’s representative to the city-wide Equity Committee, explains how “objective” cost/benefit analyses can ignore layers of subjective and historically-contingent circumstances:

Our engineers have used insurance claims as a proxy for the costs of basement flooding caused by insufficient capacity in our combined [sewer] system. It is a very objective assumption and fair in that it is applied without any discrimination. There is a difference between “fair” and “equitable,” however. The very same real [flooding] event may be much more costly to a family that has little buffer in terms of specific resources to respond . . . like insurance, savings, alternate living quarters . . . And in terms of health resiliency, we know that people of color experience the cumulative impacts of stress on their health. It is worthwhile to “tunnel into” the decisions we make to see where having more information about the people impacted, including any history of disadvantage and subsequent disparities in health and economic outcomes, can be important.

(Email correspondence, 1 November 2013)

Hansen describes how, in viewing challenges as purely environmental, as opposed to politically charged socio-environmental questions, experts and city leaders overlook complexities that determine access to the beneficial outcomes of environmental
When decision-makers take pains to be “fair” and “nondiscriminatory,” they may well reinforce existing racial and socio-economic disparities. Likewise, by not explicitly and proactively seeking to counteract disparities, CWSP’s grant-making instead served to reify them. Seemingly neutral programs, operating in the context of the decidedly unequal, non-neutral city, merely perpetuate existing inequalities.

Worse yet, planning decisions and public investments can actually exacerbate inequalities. While the use of “objective” analytical tools such as maps and census data has led to the realization that incomplete streets are disproportionately located in low-income neighborhoods (Clifton *et al.* n.d.), planners are less likely to consider the possibility that the relationship between Complete Streets and housing affordability is more than coincidental. People of color and low-income residents do not merely happen to live in neighborhoods that lack sidewalks and bike lanes; it is precisely the absence of Complete Streets amenities that makes such neighborhoods unattractive to developers and households with higher purchasing power. Yet, when the “rent gap” between actual and potential ground rent becomes wide enough—for instance, when Complete Streets amenities are added to a previously low-rent neighborhood—“redevelopment and rehabilitation into new land uses becomes a profitable prospect, and capital begins to flow back” (Smith 1982, p.149). When planners target such areas for Complete Streets investments, the ostensible beneficiaries of those investments are frequently displaced.5

Likewise, by funding community gardens, bioswales, and other Complete Streets amenities that often accompany gentrification, municipal programs (like CWSP) can be implicated in the displacement of low-income residents.

**CWSP’s equity turn**

By the mid-2000s, CWSP’s staff was growing troubled by the program’s tendency to reflect the city’s racial and spatial disparities in its grant-making, and started thinking about how to make changes. Messer summarizes CWSP’s thinking: “If you realize there’s a hardship or inequitable way that things are working, it’s the Bureau’s responsibility to prioritize attention to those things” (Interview, 31 October 2013).

CWSP’s first equity strategies were place-based. As early as 2003, the program adopted a policy of seeking to fund projects in each of the city’s four watersheds.6 In the years that followed, CWSP’s graduate student employees conducted a GIS analysis to map past projects and target underserved neighborhoods for outreach. Beginning in 2006, CWSP held annual grant application workshops at libraries and community centers in targeted areas of the city. “We wanted to make sure grants did not just fund specific neighborhoods,” Devlin explains (Presentation, 18 October 2013).

CWSP also began to offer assistance in completing the grant application and securing permits to carry out projects. Devlin describes some of the institutional barriers applicants faced: “[City permitting] is set up for developers; it’s not set up...
for the church guy to build a garden” (ibid.). These initial steps laid the groundwork for more far-reaching reforms.

Though Devlin and her staff were beginning to analyze and address spatial disparities in the program’s grant-making, they were limited in their capacity and resources, and felt constrained by BES’ status as a ratepayer-funded bureau that needed to remain focused on its core mission of stormwater management. A mandate from City Commissioner Dan Saltzman’s office in 2010, however, gave CWSP license to become more purposeful and explicit in taking an equity-oriented approach.7 Devlin explains:

The role [of Commissioner Saltzman] was really important . . . Since BES is funded by rate-payers, we can’t just do whatever we think is “neat.” We’re very conscientious about using rates for our core mission . . . So to have the Commissioner direct us, “Do this [equity] work,” that was huge. To hear they wanted it to be purposeful . . . “We want equity questions on the application”—they were very specific—that was very helpful in increasing our equity focus.

(Interview, 25 October 2013)

Saltzman’s directive did not come out of thin air. One of his advisors, Amy Trieu, had been on CWSP’s application review committee for a few years. She recalls seeing Groundwork Portland’s application seeking funds to pay young people to remove invasive plants as part of its environmental justice-focused summer employment program (Figure 10.6). “The application didn’t score well. It wasn’t very well-written, nor specific, and didn’t offer many technical details [about how the project would help improve the watershed],” Trieu remembers (Interview, 30 October 2013). But the well-being of foster youth was already a high priority for Saltzman’s office. “A youth program applying for an environmental grant was kind of unusual. But it connected with Saltzman’s other stuff, including foster kids. The environmental impact seemed low, but it was high in community impact” (ibid.). Trieu sold Saltzman on the synergistic community and environmental outcomes that could come from funding projects such as stipends for youth employment, which led to the Commissioner’s directive that CWSP take more purposeful, politically bold steps in implementing an equity agenda.

“There was a shift,” Trieu says, “in CWSP selection committee members redefining community” (ibid.). Starting in 2010, the grant application asked applicants to explain the role that underrepresented communities played in their projects. Devlin and her staff adjusted the grant’s budget restrictions so that groups could spend more money to pay young people for environmental work. “That changed the program in a huge way. It brought in different groups, and that was the intent,” Devlin recounts (Interview, 25 October 2013). These few, basic changes to the program were successful in encouraging more applicants to partner with underrepresented community groups in order to carry out their projects.
Many of these partnerships, however, were superficial, and few applications came in for projects directly envisioned and led by communities of color and other historically marginalized groups. Projects located east of 82nd Avenue were also rare. Devlin felt that CWSP needed to do more. “I kept thinking in my head that Saltzman wants us to be more purposeful [about equity],” Devlin remembers (Interview, 25 October 2013). So in 2012, CWSP and PSU cobbled together funds to hire a third graduate employee, Cameron Herrington (co-author of this chapter), who was given the specific charge of analyzing CWSP’s structure and practices, leading to changes that would deepen and institutionalize CWSP’s commitment to equity.

**A forward-looking view of equity planning: the nuts and bolts**

With added analytical capacity and community outreach experience coming from Herrington’s position, over the past two years, CWSP has implemented a handful of important reforms. While specific to the context of CWSP, these changes point to the more widely applicable strategies and principles heralded by equity planning practitioner and scholar, Norman Krumholz. Drawing on his experience as
Cleveland’s planning director in the 1970s, Krumholz has spent much of his career thinking about how municipal employees can prioritize the needs of marginalized communities. In his classic article, “A Retrospective View of Equity Planning,” Krumholz (1982) describes the urgent challenges that existed in Cleveland in the 1970s, and summarizes his department’s efforts to provide “a wider range of choices for those Cleveland residents who have few, if any, choices” (p. 163). Here we draw on Krumholz’s reflections to help outline three areas in which CWSP has moved to become more responsive to underrepresented groups: (1) setting concrete goals; (2) infusing daily practices with an equity lens; and (3) spreading the word to other municipal programs.

Setting concrete goals

The most fundamental lesson that Krumholz learned in Cleveland is that there needs to be an explicit, overarching goal of social equity if results are to change. In order to move beyond the realm of equity rhetoric, and into the sphere of equity outcomes, goals must be clearly defined and measurable. In the case of CWSP, leaders decided that improving equity meant awarding more grants to projects that not only involved, but were led by, underrepresented groups. This entailed two steps: first, CWSP had to attract more applications for projects spearheaded by underrepresented community groups. Second, from among submitted applications, CWSP’s review committee had to prioritize those projects for funding.

In order to measure improvement, CWSP staff first needed to establish a baseline of equity performance, against which outcomes could be compared on a year-to-year basis. In 2012, CWSP staff analyzed all applications from the previous three grant cycles, and assigned each one a score based on the degree of underrepresented groups’ participation and leadership. This scoring system took an abstract equity goal and made it measurable, with higher scores going to projects that entailed higher levels of underrepresented group influence.

This initial baseline analysis confirmed assumptions that outreach efforts were not effectively reaching underrepresented groups: for the 2010–11 grant cycle (the first in which an equity question was asked in the application), 38 percent of applications had some involvement by underrepresented groups (usually a partnership with a dominant culture group that was the lead applicant), and only 9 percent were led by underrepresented groups (3 out of 34 total applications). Working from this starting point, CWSP could gauge improvements.

One key component of CWSP’s goal-setting was an emphasis on acknowledging past injustices. For CWSP, examining Portland’s history of uneven development (Smith 2008) associated with urban renewal policies, for example, helped underscore the idea that spatial equity approaches, while important, do not necessarily translate into socioeconomic equity outcomes. This is an especially prescient consideration in the context of rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods, where green development often involves the displacement of marginalized groups to underserved parts of the city. From 2012 forward, therefore, CWSP’s concrete
equity goals became focused on awarding grants to underrepresented populations, rather than just underserved neighborhoods.

Complete Streets planners, too, can become much more attuned to the complex relationship between spatial and socio-economic disparities. In order to ensure that underrepresented groups are the beneficiaries of Complete Streets enhancements (and other publicly funded projects that increase private property values), planners can advocate for explicit anti-displacement measures such as community benefits agreements, community controlled housing, and workforce development initiatives.

Infusing daily practices with an equity lens

For Krumholz (1982), clearly defined goals provide a framework for everyday decision-making. He asserts that planners and bureaucrats must ask “who benefits, and who pays” for every decision that crosses the desk; no decision is too small to be analyzed through an equity lens. There must be a “concentrated attack on these [day-to-day] problems” (ibid., p. 173). For CWSP, outreach and promotion, the application process, selection of grantees, and support for grantees constitute the everyday operations of the program. Such routine activities, on the surface, may appear as mere bureaucratic details. But in reality, these comprise the substantive elements that determine who benefits from CWSP’s approximately $95,000 in annual grant funds. Staff asked how they could overcome obstacles to broader participation, while staying within the bounds of the core missions of CWSP and BES.

Communication and outreach

Shannon Jamison, one of CWSP’s current graduate student coordinators, has helped implement the program’s shift to a more purposeful equity agenda. She succinctly states:

The onus is on us to make our program more relevant and accessible [to underrepresented communities]. We can’t just change our grant selection priorities. We actually have to change our program so it’s relevant to a broader swath of the city.

(Interview, 8 October 2013)

CWSP reached out to underrepresented community groups to gain a better understanding of the barriers they faced in accessing the program, and to ask what would make it more relevant to their existing needs and priorities. Quite simply, “We asked people what was important to them,” explains Jamison (ibid.).

Until 2012, CWSP’s messaging and outreach had been focused on environmental projects that resonated with Portland’s dominant—white, middle-class—sustainability culture. Its email announcements and flyers promoted the grant as a means of funding eco-roofs, stormwater management facilities, and nature-scaping projects, which reinforced the notion that CWSP was a program for environmentalists. Even CWSP’s name, the Community Watershed Stewardship Program,
poses an initial hurdle in reaching out to communities that are not familiar with the concept of watershed stewardship.

Whereas the watershed health message resonated with organizations that were already familiar with that language, and had time and resources to devote to explicitly environmental projects, it did not speak to communities that were contending with pressing priorities such as food insecurity or neighborhood safety. “I’ve seen your email announcements, but I delete them because we’re not an environmental group,” the director of one East Portland community-based organization told a CWSP staffer. The outreach and messaging challenge for CWSP was clear: it had to make the program relevant to groups that were motivated primarily by (seemingly) non-environmental concerns.

Through conversations with community leaders, and a review of past grant applications, CWSP staff compiled a list of community defined priorities and paired them with projects that are eligible for CWSP funding based on their watershed health benefits (see Table 10.1). “We can have different motivations—a community group is concerned with youth employment, BES wants to reduce stormwater runoff—but still work together on a project that meets both sets of goals,” Jamison explains (ibid.). This analysis fed back into CWSP’s messaging strategy, providing language to emphasize why non-environmentally oriented groups might want to apply.

Planning departments, for their part, can work to identify and prioritize under-represented community defined priorities, some of which might be addressed through Complete Streets initiatives. Moreover, rather than using common Complete Streets terminology such as sustainability, walkability, and livability, planning departments with equity objectives can more overtly state how Complete Streets initiatives are intended to address community defined concerns, such as pedestrian safety and public health.

Along these lines, CWSP staff began to send outreach emails and distribute posters with the headline, “Funding for YOUR community project!” This contrasted with previous years’ materials, which said, “Fund your next watershed project” (see Figures 10.7a and 10.7b). For groups that weren’t familiar with water-

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<th>Community priorities</th>
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<td>Food, nutrition, activities for elders and youth</td>
<td>Community gardens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership and employment for youth</td>
<td>Youth summer programs with stipends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crime and neighborhood livability</td>
<td>Re-greening properties, community spaces, art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant and refugee inclusion</td>
<td>Educational opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flooding, standing water</td>
<td>De-paving, bioswales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Community Watershed Stewardship Grants

Fund Your Next Watershed Project

Apply now

The health of a watershed is the result of the great ideas and work of everyone who lives and plays within that watershed. Help make your watershed a healthier place by applying for a Community Watershed Stewardship Program Grant.
shed terminology, or that had never done a watershed project, the prospect of doing a “next” watershed project was presumably not very enticing (Herrington presentation, 18 October 2013). Messer sums up the messaging approach that CWSP has adopted over the last two grant cycles:

There has to be something that provides a sense of efficacy. . . and relevance. You don’t talk about an abstract thing called stormwater, you talk about food, a vacant lot that could be a garden, but it could also be a runoff area . . . You can’t assume that all communities have that [mainstream environmental] knowledge. You have to make this work part of their world. And in so doing it furthers broader environmental objectives.

(Interview, 31 October 2013)

Indeed, working with groups that did not have pre-existing environmental acumen and motivations has made CWSP a more effective program, in BES’ own terms, by helping it to engage a more representative swath of Portlanders in watershed stewardship—a true win-win for the community and the city.

Armed with more effective messages and outreach materials, CWSP adopted a proactive plan in order to connect with groups that had not previously applied for grants. Staff now specifically reach out to organizations led by and representing people of color and other historically marginalized groups. Rather than expecting potential applicants to come downtown to BES’ offices for meetings, staff members...
board buses and ride bikes across the city, meeting applicants at their churches, homes, and neighborhood coffee shops. Jamison says, “A huge part of the success is the people component. Having one-on-one meetings and talking about what they want and need, what communities are interested in, is really important” (Interview, 8 October 2013).

Furthermore, CWSP has relied upon a handful of city staffers who already have solid relationships with underrepresented groups to introduce and vouch for the grant program. Polo Catalani, director of the city’s New Portlander Program, introduced CWSP staff to immigrant and refugee community leaders by hosting a dinner at an immigrant owned restaurant. Jamison reflects, “Figuring out who are the right messengers, and having those people make introductions, goes a long way” (ibid.).

As a result of its revamped messaging and outreach strategy, CWSP was able to meet its equity goal of attracting far more applications for projects envisioned and led by underrepresented community groups. For the 2013–14 grant cycle, 74 percent of the proposed projects had some degree of participation by underrepresented groups, up from 38 percent in 2010–11. More importantly, one-third of the applications were for projects led by those groups, up from only 9 percent three years earlier.

The application process

Based on feedback from community organizations, CWSP streamlined the application process by eliminating unnecessary questions from the application form. Additionally, staff provided targeted support to assist new groups with the application process, and spent less time working closely with veteran applicants. “Our program asked people to talk very articulately about environmental issues. But several first-time applicants asked me, ‘What is a watershed?’ This puts people at a disadvantage,” Jamison explains (ibid.). Staff now sit with applicants, helping them evaluate their project goals and adjust language in order to communicate both community and watershed health benefits and make applications more competitive. Cohen, Groundwork Portland Director, reflected, “CWSP can be a resource for smaller organizations [like us] to get introduced to watershed restoration work, even if they don’t have the skill set ahead of time. They help get them going” (Interview, 25 October 2013).

Notably, many groups led by immigrants and communities of color told CWSP they’d like to use funds for community garden projects. They hoped to grow food, provide gardening education, and facilitate outdoor activities for youth and elders. But whereas CWSP had no explicit restrictions for other types of projects, a list of constraints that applied only to community gardens had been adopted in 2011. With the support of Devlin and BES managers, CWSP eliminated those garden restrictions prior to the 2013–14 grant cycle. The program’s application guide instead now contains a table listing various components of a food garden project that can enhance watershed health, thereby making garden projects more likely to receive funding.
Selection criteria

While shifts in messaging, outreach strategy, and the application process were fundamental in helping CWSP attract applications from a more diverse range of groups, Devlin and her staff knew they also needed to address equity in the grant selection process. The selection committee had always made funding decisions based on the two aspects of CWSP’s core mission: first, projects had to improve watershed health, and, second, they had to be community-based (that is, an individual or small group of people would be unlikely to receive funding). Over the past three years, however, CWSP has instituted a third evaluation variable, which assesses the role that underrepresented groups play in envisioning and implementing projects.

To ensure that the program has the capacity to accurately evaluate applications on the basis of the new equity criterion, CWSP recruits staff members from the city’s Office of Equity and Human Rights and the citywide Equity Committee to serve on the selection committee. All selection committee members—including environmental scientists, stormwater experts, and environmental educators from BES—are now instructed to consider equity alongside the other two criteria, and the committee has taken that charge seriously. For the 2013–14 grant cycle, 100 percent of funded projects had some level of involvement by underrepresented community groups, compared to the 74 percent of the applications that met that standard. Projects led by underrepresented groups, meanwhile, made up two-thirds of the grant awards, after comprising one-third of the applications. Far from being accidental or coincidental, this “overfunding” of underrepresented communities’ projects is by design, and is now institutionalized in the program’s selection process.

Implementation support

The final component of CWSP’s day-to-day operation entails supporting groups that receive funding as they implement their projects. CWSP staff remain limited in time and resources to invest in this area, and so call on past grantees to help support less-experienced groups. Such collaborations are imperative. Cohen says, “We met new partner organizations with the help of CWSP that have potential [work projects] for our young folks . . . This helps with job skills training and stewardship experience, and they get paid in the process . . . It’s been critical” (ibid.). And two established environmental organizations that had received CWSP grants in past years, Depave and the Johnson Creek Watershed Council, were instrumental partners in remedying the parking lot flooding challenge at St. Mary Ethiopian Orthodox Church (described at the beginning of this chapter).

Jamison recounts some of the benefits of pairing mainstream environmental groups with community groups:

[Mainstream environmental] groups are now partnering up with underrepresented groups in order to get their watershed goals accomplished [due to the new funding criteria], and it’s helping community groups get their goals
accomplished, too. There’s genuine interest in how they can work with new groups to achieve goals. There doesn’t seem to be any animosity [about the new funding criteria]. [Environmental groups] know they need to get savvy with our new equity focus—it’s not going away. That’s pretty powerful.

*(Interview, 8 October 2013)*

**Spreading the word**

Finally, Krumholz underscores the need to engage with the larger political arena beyond one’s own bureau or program around equity issues, including talking with elected officials, other bureaucrats, and community leaders. For CWSP, in addition to engaging with energized PSU students that bring in new ideas, this has meant inviting policy analysts from elected officials’ offices to help evaluate applications. As described above, such outreach played a decisive role in making CWSP’s equity approach more explicit.

Krumholz (1982, p.174) stresses that activist-oriented city staff must remain politically engaged:

> If [bureaucrats] consistently place before their political superiors analyses, policies, and recommendations which lead to greater equity, and if they are willing to publicly join in the fight for the adoption of these recommendations, some of them will be adopted when the time is ripe.

Portland’s City Council became familiar with CWSP through yearly briefings, and when a budget crisis in 2013 caused the mayor to cut CWSP from his proposed budget, past grant recipients’ testimony, along with pressure from the city’s Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR), prompted the Council to reinstate funding for the program.

To share its equity approach more widely, CWSP has collaborated with OEHR to develop a 40-minute presentation documenting the program’s “promising equity practices.” Devlin describes the enthusiasm that has emerged in BES: “I have six groups in my own bureau that want the presentation. They want to know what the thinking looks like and how to get here . . . What are the nuts and bolts?” *(Interview, 25 October 2013).* OEHR, meanwhile, is working to schedule the presentation for other city bureaus. At one recent presentation, a Housing Bureau staff member reflected, “We are looking at the same thing [as CWSP] . . . I’m curious about looking at our language and seeing what kinds of embedded barriers there are [to our programs]” *(Public comments, 18 October 2013).*

**Conclusion**

The case of CWSP provides one example of how to operationalize equity aspirations in sustainability and Complete Streets–oriented programs. But feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006, p.105) reminds us that illuminating
the practices of one city program, as we have done here, is not merely an exercise in exposing “what’s out there.” Rather, in researching and writing this chapter, we are making an active attempt to produce and transform discourses associated with Complete Streets. Along with sustainability and livability, emphases on Complete Streets in city planning and governance circles contain multiple and contradictory possibilities and outcomes. We hope that, in bringing attention to a handful of tangible ways that CWSP and its grantees have reimagined and reinterpreted the watershed health component of Complete Streets planning, we are helping to actualize more socially and environmentally just political projects and desires.

To be sure, CWSP and BES still have work to do to become even more responsive to the needs of all city residents. While CWSP’s grant application has become more streamlined, for instance, a considerable amount of paperwork is still required for a relatively small amount of funding; this can quickly overwhelm small organizations, like St. Mary’s congregation and Groundwork Portland.

But Hansen, BES engineer and Equity Committee representative, reiterates the importance of the steps CWSP has taken: “It’s like planting seeds. It’s easier to talk to other programs about how to translate this stuff into the concrete, day-to-day running of their programs with an example like CWSP.” And Cohen, Groundwork Portland executive director, describes the substantial work her program’s youth have done with the help of CWSP funding: “We’ve done brownfield tours and remediation projects. These have helped young people from low-income households of color learn about environmental issues and learn valuable job skills for the green economy, while enhancing Portland’s watersheds” (Interview, 25 October 2013).

Yet, we cannot rely solely on the work of grassroots community groups such as those funded by CWSP, nor individual municipal employees, to fight widespread socio-environmental injustices. The inclusive, hands-on approach we document here may well be effective in sharing a small pot of public resources with those who have historically been excluded. Fully addressing more profound injustices such as gentrification/displacement, however, will require commitments and effective policies at higher levels of sustainable city planning and governance. After all, the circumstances and histories that structure disparities operate at much greater scales than that of a church parking lot, a brownfield, a watershed, or even a city. Cohen describes the layers of history and institutional exploitation that merge to produce the poverty and inequities that many Groundwork youth and their families face:

[Brownfield lots] have been vacant, sitting there for decades while the Black community was there, and now they’re getting flipped and turned into beautiful coffee shops and bars. People can’t afford to live here [in inner Northeast Portland] anymore and reap the benefits . . . There’s systemic racism and oppression that affect folks here locally, and impact their lived experience . . . Youth tend to blame themselves. They think about change as “What can I as an individual do to pick up trash?,” versus what are the systemic things that need to be fought and organized around?

(Interview, 25 October 2013)
Confronting the historical and systemic injustices that Cohen references requires dedicated resources from public sector entities. Such resources have been vital for CWSP, which has hired graduate student employees specifically to perform equity analysis and push forward program reform. Messer emphasizes that student employees bring an invaluable “energy, vision, and persistence of attention to the sometimes neglected areas [such as equity] that frequently get lost in the day-to-day over-burdened world of city bureaus” (Email correspondence, 21 November 2013). Many municipal offices do not have such resources—nor the institutional backing to pursue such an agenda in the first place. “How do you do this without a dedicated person that can make you uncomfortable and call things out?” Devlin asks. “Change is an uphill battle. We are creatures of habit, and change is difficult” (Interview, 25 October 2013).

Nonetheless, Complete Streets–oriented programs that are purposeful in their equity work can have a broader impact. As the example of CWSP demonstrates, they can serve as a testing ground for new models and practices that translate equity rhetoric into tangible outcomes, thereby opening more space for social justice- oriented community groups to work, and providing immediate, compelling examples for like-minded planners, practitioners, and policy-makers.

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, we follow CWSP’s lead in defining underrepresented groups as communities of color, immigrants, refugees, elders, and others who have historically been discriminated against and excluded from access to economic and political power.
2 Redlining is the practice of drawing a red line around African-American neighborhoods on maps, and then deeming properties substantially lower in value than in other neighborhoods and/or charging more for banking, insurance, and other services within the boundaries; it was used as a discriminatory tool by real estate agents to segregate neighborhoods from the 1920s to 1968.
3 Some neighborhoods west of 82nd Avenue lack Complete Streets as well. Additionally, poverty is not confined to East Portland, and more affluent residents live in some East Portland census tracts. But disparities between East Portland and other areas are starker, steadily increasing, and reflect a history of locally uneven power relations (Schmidt 2013), making East Portland’s lack of Complete Streets particularly notable.
4 Miéville’s The City and The City is set in a quasi-fantastical, dual city-state, in which two separate cities occupy the same physical space. Residents of each city are trained from birth to ignore the people, streets and buildings of the other, despite their being constantly in plain sight. Transgressions across this cultural spatial divide are severely punished.
5 In this chapter we heavily emphasize the intersection of Complete Streets–oriented planning and gentrification/displacement, as this is a particularly pertinent theme in Portland. Moreover, as gentrification has become a globalized “consummate expression of neoliberal urbanism . . . mobilized [by] individual property claims via a market lubricated by state donation” (Smith 2002, p. 99), we contend that it is nearly impossible to discuss the production of urban space taking place through Complete Streets planning without putting gentrification/displacement issues at the center of analysis (though related themes, such as disparities in health outcomes, are certainly relevant as well).
6 There are four primary watersheds within Portland’s city limits: Fanno/Tryon Creeks, Willamette River, Johnson Creek, and Columbia Slough.
7 In Portland’s commission form of government, commissioners have both legislative and administrative authority. In addition to serving on the City Council, each commissioner
is assigned by the mayor to run specific bureaus. BES was in Commissioner Saltzman’s portfolio at the time.

8 Planning theorist Firanak Miraftab (2009, p. 44) describes how virtually any actor (including activists, mothers, teachers, city workers) can be transformative (“insurgent”) planners if they engage in “purposeful actions that aim to disrupt domineering relationships of oppressors to the oppressed, and to destabilize such a status quo through consciousness of the past and imagination of an alternative future.” While CWSP staff and other bureaucrats implementing Complete Streets or sustainability initiatives may not have “city planner” as their job title, we contend that city employees seeking to implement an equity agenda in their programs and bureaus are dabbling in a political world more akin to that of city planners and community development practitioners than techno-rational experts, and therefore seek insights from the field of equity planning.

9 Scoring system: 0 for no participation by underrepresented groups; 1 for limited participation in a project led by a dominant culture organization; 2 for a fundamental partnership between a dominant culture group and an underrepresented community; and 3 for projects envisioned and led by underrepresented groups.

10 Brownfields are sites where future use is affected by past industrial or commercial contamination.

References


