

Watts Rising Community Planning: Coordinated Partnerships and Planning for Climate Resilience

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Since 1965, the South Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts has been synonymous in many people's minds with the uprising in response to police brutality that led to the deployment of 14,000 National Guard troops and resulted in 34 deaths and an estimated \$40 million dollars in property damage. In subsequent decades, the demographics of Watts have changed from predominantly African American to predominantly Latinx, but Watts remains a community characterized by historic disinvestment, environmental injustice, and community activism. Today, some of this activism is focused on climate-resilient development.

Watts is home to 40,000 residents, many of whom are exposed to high levels of air and noise pollution in addition to being isolated from many urban amenities. In 2017, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles began to convene residents in what became *Watts Rising*, a community-driven initiative to transform the area through projects designed to reduce greenhouse gases while providing local environmental, health, and economic co-benefits. The *Watts Rising* investments include 24 projects across seven issue areas: affordable housing and sustainable communities, food waste prevention and rescue, low carbon transportation, rooftop solar and energy efficiency, transit operations, urban and community forestry, and urban greening.

As a group of investment projects and programs centered on climate resilience, *Watts Rising* was able to apply for and was awarded a grant from California's Strategic Growth Council as part of the Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) program. TCC funding requires applicants to develop plans for community engagement, workforce development, and displacement avoidance, but in many ways the *Watts Rising* investments are simply good developments that include climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. For example, its central public housing development, *Jordan Downs*, was designed with LEEDS Gold certification and has funding for discounted transit passes, a job training program for residents, new pedestrian pathways, and the planting of 300 trees.

What makes the *Watts Rising* projects unique is that these types of investments are generally not made in low-income communities of color and are generally not coordinated. This reflects the mandate of TCC, which was authorized in 2016 to fund the development of neighborhood-level transformative climate plans for disadvantaged communities. TCC is funded by revenue generated from California's cap-and-trade program. As a result of environmental justice advocacy, state law requires that 20% of cap-and-trade revenue be allocated to projects that reduce greenhouse gases in disadvantaged communities.

Financing

In 2019, the Strategic Growth Council awarded \$33.25 million to the Watts Rising Collaborative. The collaborative is leveraging an additional \$168 million in finance and subsidies to support their vision, including a \$35 million Choice Neighborhoods Implementation grant. The additional funds come from a variety of sources. For example, the Jordan Downs public housing redevelopment project was financed through low-income housing tax credits (LIHTCs), a tax-exempt bond, loans from The California Endowment, Freddie Mac, and soft loans from the Housing Authority.

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What made this work?

The Watts Rising collaborative incorporates the work and vision of 19 partners in Watts, many of whom have been working in the community for decades. Many of the local community organizing efforts have focused on specific issues such as transportation and food access, affordable housing, and jobs. All of these issues have climate implications, but it took funding to create the organizing entity that brought these groups together.

Many of the outreach and engagement strategies deployed by the community advisory committee preceded the creation of Watts Rising. For example, in 2013, Charles Drew University organized a survey of 700 Watts households administered by local youth. The survey findings informed the Watts Rising project design and laid the groundwork for ongoing surveys of residents as the project progresses. The TCC funding was also the result of ongoing advocacy from local environmental justice organizations and in turn led to a focus on community process.

The Housing Authority of Los Angeles was already planning a redevelopment of Jordan Downs when they learned about the TCC grant opportunity. As part of their planning, they had put mechanisms in place for community outreach and engagement and were able to tap into the rich organizing history of the neighborhood. Using this planning for an existing development allowed them to build out a more comprehensive plan that went beyond housing and to support the development of Watts Rising, which brought in other community interests and voices. Although the long-term impacts of this collaborative effort remain to be seen, initial evaluations are promising.



Rendering of Jordan Downs by SVA Architects, courtesy of BRIDGE Housing

Other Communities

There are many ways to integrate climate resilience into projects. But climate resilience investments are more likely to be sustainable when they coordinate across a variety of projects and programs within the footprint of shared climate risks. The projects below reflect other forms of coordination and collaboration around revenue for climate investments.

Unlike Watts Rising, which used state funding to bring together projects supporting climate resilience, the Great Rivers Greenway District (GRG) in Missouri is a special district that was initially promoted as a way to improve quality of life but has used its regional footprint to mitigate flood risks. In 2000, the residents of the City of St. Louis and St. Louis and St. Charles Counties voted on a proposition to create a sales tax that would invest in connecting the region's rivers, parks, and trails. This Clean Water, Safe Parks and Community Trails Initiative provided GRG with a \$10 million budget through a one-tenth of one cent sales tax. Including strategies for mitigating flood risks in a region where flooding has long been a clear and present danger made this effort a climate-resilient investment.

By creating a revenue stream that covered the major flood risks for the area, GRG has become an important layer of regional governance and is able to access other funds for projects that support its broader vision while addressing long-term climate resilience. GRG has jurisdiction over three counties and 120 municipalities and is governed by a 12-member board that works with 265+ partners. The sales tax initiative that supported the formation of GRG was led by a broad base of grassroots organizations who used the proposition to engage voters in the vision of a regional plan.

A different type of multi-sector collaboration and governance is at play at a smaller scale in Washington's Duwamish Valley. As a Superfund site and the home to Seattle's only river, the Duwamish Valley faces multiple environmental risks; sea level rise, historic neglect, and aging infrastructure make it particularly vulnerable to climate change. Like Watts Rising, the collaborative in the Duwamish Valley emerged from an investment opportunity (in this case \$100 million for stormwater management from the Seattle Public Utility [SPU]), which the City of Seattle used as an opportunity to build a larger collaboration centered on community needs.

SPU's infrastructure investment led to a partnership of city departments (anchored by the Office of Sustainability and Environment and the Office of Planning and Community Development) that seeks to incorporate environmental justice and equitable development into their climate mitigation and adaptation investments. The Duwamish Valley Action Plan, which was released in 2018, lays out the goals and strategies of this city-community vision.

The scale and scope of climate investments in Watts, St. Louis, and the Duwamish Valley are different, but in each case the communities developed a multi-sector collaboration that is seeking to advance multiple investments that integrate climate change and equity.

Lessons

◆ **Community organizing can lay the groundwork to take advantage of emerging opportunities.**

- ▶ The Community Advisory Committee of Watts Rising is composed of many local leaders with long histories of community advocacy along with representatives of various agencies who are integral to the success of this work. Many of the priorities in the plan had previously been clearly identified as community needs.
- ▶ As new climate strategies such as cap and trade bring revenue to state government, organizing and advocacy can ensure that money is allocated to communities of color.

◆ **New governance structures and funding can encourage multijurisdictional and cross-sectoral collaboration.**

- ▶ Grant funding can help developers add climate and equity to existing projects.
- ▶ Large investments such as stormwater or sea rise infrastructure offer an opportunity to embed a variety of innovative investments.

◆ **Climate resilient investments do not need to reinvent the wheel.**

- ▶ Climate resilience can be layered onto investments that are not explicitly climate oriented. There are many ways to use existing mandates, investments, and projects to achieve climate and equity benefits.
- ▶ Localities can learn from each other about the possibilities for climate investments and their co-benefits. 🌱

About the Author

Saneta deVuono-powell is a co-founder and partner at Ground Works Consulting, where her focus is supporting equitable community development and climate justice. Saneta has over a decade of experience working on issues of racial justice, housing, and health and conducting community-based participatory research. She serves on the Oakland Rent Board, sits on the boards of the Texas Observer and The Safe Return Project, and is a contributing editor at Stranger's Guide. Saneta received her bachelor's degree from Sarah Lawrence College and both her law degree and her master's degree in city planning from UC Berkeley.

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<https://centerforcommunityinvestment.org/resource/seeding-climate-resilience-through-equitable-investment>

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