

# City of Berkeley: Safety Element and Environmental Justice Element Update

## Adaptation Planning Grant Program: Final Case Study

### Project Summary

The City of Berkeley undertook this project to address the unequal exposure of its communities to natural hazards and climate change impacts, which are shaped by longstanding inequities in education, environmental conditions, health, and access to decision-making. Disparities in environmental quality and access to public resources have resulted in uneven health and safety outcomes across the city. To respond, Berkeley set out to update its General Plan Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element, develop a new Environmental Justice Element, and co-create community-informed metrics to track progress toward climate and resilience goals.

Serving the entire City of Berkeley in Alameda County, the project was guided by state legislative requirements, including SB 1000 for the Environmental Justice Element and multiple mandates informing the Safety Element, such as SB 379, and related state codes and executive orders. In partnership with the Ecology Center and a nine-member Community Advisory Committee (CAC), the city centered community-driven planning and created meaningful opportunities for engagement throughout the process. Identifying inequities directly informed policy recommendations that aim to improve resilience, reduce disproportionate climate and environmental burdens, and strengthen long-term community safety.

The project followed a collaborative, equity-focused approach that integrated technical analysis with community knowledge. Key activities included a social vulnerability analysis, climate adaptation assessment, groundwater rise and toxic materials analysis, and an environmental justice existing conditions assessment. These data-driven studies, informed and refined by community input, shaped the goals, policies, and programs of both the Environmental Justice Element and the updated Safety Element. Ongoing engagement with the CAC and the broader public ensured that lived experiences calibrated technical findings and elevated community priorities. The project culminated in the development of an Equitable Climate and Resilience Monitoring and Evaluation

Strategy and dashboard, providing a framework to track and share progress, enhance resilience, and support equitable outcomes across Berkeley.

## Climate Risks & Vulnerabilities

The project addresses known and anticipated climate change impacts by explicitly identifying climate-related hazards and embedding community-informed priorities into updated and newly developed policies and programs. A combination of technical tools and community-centered methods supported the collection, analysis, and communication of climate impact data. Local climate projections were informed by Cal-Adapt's Local Climate Change Snapshot, the Alameda County Heat Vulnerability Map, California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment, and the city's Local Hazard Mitigation Plan. These data sources were complemented by qualitative insights gathered through one-on-one conversations, community mapping exercises that enabled residents to identify place-based risks and resilience assets, and regular meetings with the Community Advisory Committee. These results were documented in the [Climate Adaptation Assessment \(Safety Existing Conditions Report\)](#) and the [EJ Existing Conditions Report](#), and directly informed the development of draft goals, policies, and programs within both the Safety and EJ Elements. By co-creating the Safety and EJ Elements with communities that have historically been excluded from planning processes, the project establishes a foundation of trust and shared ownership. The resulting elements reflect community-specific concerns, values, and priorities, positioning Berkeley to advance long-term resilience strategies through continued collaboration and more equitable adaptation planning.

## Project Impact on Community Planning & Capacity Community Engagement

This project significantly strengthened Berkeley's capacity to plan for and respond to climate risks and hazards by grounding long-term policy decisions in robust technical analysis and community partnership. Key deliverables include a Social Vulnerability Analysis, Climate Adaptation Assessment, and a [Groundwater Rise and Toxic Materials Analysis](#). Together, these efforts deepened the city's understanding of climate-related hazards and social vulnerability, directly informing updates to the Safety Element and the development of a new Environmental Justice (EJ) Element. The updated Safety Element strengthens the city's approach to wildfire risk, air quality, disaster preparedness, and community resilience, while the new EJ Element advances equity by addressing access to healthy food and clean, accessible public spaces and facilities. Together, these plans establish a comprehensive and integrated framework for reducing climate risks and improving community resilience. Both elements now include clearly defined goals, policies, and programs that identify priority needs and guide climate adaptation, hazard

mitigation, and equitable outcomes. In parallel, the project increased community awareness of climate risks and their connections to public safety and environmental justice, helping residents better understand local vulnerabilities and the city's response strategies.

A key outcome of the project is the creation of community-driven climate resilience metrics co-developed with residents, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. These metrics ensure that progress is tracked and reported on the issues that matter most to frontline communities. Examples include increasing the number and accessibility of food access resources and enhancing tree canopy percentage.

## Community Engagement

Community engagement for this project was intentionally designed to center communities that have been historically marginalized in Berkeley. The city partnered with the Ecology Center, a trusted local organization, to lead equitable engagement efforts. The Ecology Center connected with community-based organizations that both represented historically marginalized populations and aligned with the environmental justice communities identified in the project's analysis. Organizations with the interest and capacity to participate were invited to join the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) and entered into formal memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the Ecology Center to define roles, expectations, and equitable compensation. The project team also led broader, community-wide engagement with input and support from the CAC.

A wide range of engagement formats were used to maximize flexibility and participation. These included bilingual online surveys in English and Spanish, a public workshop, and in-person and virtual meetings. A series of 15 pop-up exhibit events were held across public and community venues throughout Berkeley, allowing participants to interact directly with materials, provide written feedback, and engage in conversation with staff. The pop-up exhibit was also shared online to reach those unable to attend in person. Community mapping exercises were conducted both in person and virtually, with participants referred by CAC members, further grounding the project in lived experience.

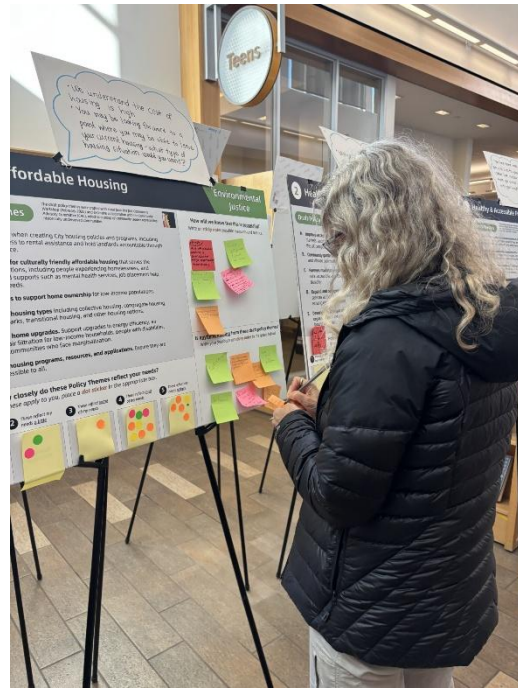


Figure 1: Berkeley Pop-Up Exhibit - South Library

Accessibility was a core principle of the engagement strategy. Pop-up exhibit materials were translated into Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Nepali, and on-site Spanish translation was available at one event. Materials on boards were provided as handouts in both normal and large fonts. At multiple events, staff read material one-on-one to community members, transcribing their responses and submitting on their behalf. Two project team members provided informal language support as needed. Several events were hosted at accessible facilities (for example, libraries, senior centers, and the Ed Roberts Campus) where the project team provided supportive and interactive opportunities for people of varying abilities to participate. To reduce participation barriers, food, stipends, and culturally appropriate giveaways were provided, and child-friendly activities were offered at select events.



*Figure 2: Berkeley Pop-Up Exhibit - UC Berkeley*

CAC members played a critical role in decision-making throughout the process. For example, the CAC shaped outreach efforts by providing guidance on where and with whom to conduct outreach, hosting pop-up exhibits, assisting with outreach and facilitating access to their community networks. This approach helped ensure engagement occurred in familiar, welcoming environments rather than relying solely on traditional government venues. The CAC also served as the foundation for developing

the policy framework. Policy themes identified by the CAC through an iterative process shaped the content presented to the broader community and were carried forward into the policy framework. Before materials were shared publicly, CAC members reviewed and confirmed that the language reflected their intent and priorities.

These strategies demonstrated respect for community expertise and created welcoming spaces and support for participation—an approach the city plans to replicate in future engagement efforts.

## Partnerships & Governance

This two-year project was made possible through strong partnerships among community organizations, consultants, and the city, each playing a critical role in advancing equitable planning outcomes. The Ecology Center served as the city's primary equitable community engagement partner, cultivating and facilitating the Community Advisory Committee

(CAC) and balancing advocacy for community priorities with the practical needs of completing grant deliverables. Their trusted role ensured that community knowledge, concerns, and lived experience were meaningfully integrated into the project while maintaining alignment with city goals and requirements.

CAC members were key partners; demonstrating consistent participation to ensure that community priorities and needs were accurately reflected in the project's analyses, policies, and recommendations. The members provided guidance at every stage of the process, helping shape equity guidelines, project language, community mapping analysis, technical assessments, and the final Safety and Environmental Justice Elements, as well as broader engagement efforts.

The consultant team—Rincon Consultants, Equity First Consulting, and CivicMakers—played essential roles in achieving the project's outcomes. As the lead consultant, Rincon coordinated the project team, provided expertise on General Plan requirements, led the technical analyses, drafted deliverables, and supported community engagement. Rincon was instrumental in ensuring that CAC input and



*Figure 3: Berkeley Pop-Up Exhibit - Waterside Workshops*

equity considerations were authentically represented in both draft and final documents. Equity First Consulting supported this work by reviewing deliverables through an equity lens and providing targeted guidance to strengthen equity integration throughout the project. CivicMakers contributed specialized community engagement expertise, helping design and implement accessible and effective engagement strategies, including the two-week pop-Up Exhibit that successfully broadened community participation.

These partnerships are expected to extend beyond the grant period into implementation. The city and its partners are actively seeking funding to continue working with the CAC to support implementation of the project's recommendations and potentially address future planning efforts, although some CAC members have expressed that they will continue to engage with staff even if funding is not secured. Several needs and recommendations

identified by the CAC are already being elevated in ongoing city and community conversations, particularly those related to strengthening connections among community organizations and between communities and the city.

## Lessons Learned & Next Steps

This project was successful in centering community voices throughout the planning process and translating community priorities into concrete policy outcomes. This was accomplished by a commitment from the project team to ensure that draft and final documents reflected the interests, needs, and lived experiences of community members. The project team engaged CAC members at each step in the process, who confirmed that the policy framework accurately captured their intent and priorities. The Ecology Center served a central role in the success of this project – the organization demonstrated a consistent presence, transparency, and relationship-building skills – that were essential to meaningful collaboration and bridge-building between the city and community members.

The project also delivered tangible benefits for vulnerable and frontline communities by reshaping how the city engages with residents. Partnerships were built with community-based organizations that have historically been excluded from government processes, with the Ecology Center serving as a trusted liaison. Through formal MOUs, CAC members were compensated equitably for their time and expertise, and participants were paid for their involvement in project activities. Engagement events included food, child-friendly activities, and one-on-one assistance from an intentionally well-staffed project team, with the goals of reducing barriers to participation and demonstrating respect for community contributions. Events co-sponsored by CAC at a venue chosen by CAC proved to be most effective, both in terms of bringing new voices to the table and in strengthening connections between the community and city staff who supported co-sponsored events.

The project also navigated challenges effectively. An example is that the city had not identified the need for MOU development and budget at the point of the grant proposal, but when this need was identified, this challenge was addressed by securing additional funding, which enabled equitable compensation and formalized community participation.

Building on the foundation established through this grant, the city is actively advancing implementation of priority actions outlined in the Safety and Environmental Justice Elements, including through pursuing additional funding opportunities to support further engagement with the CAC. To sustain the benefits of this work beyond the grant period, the city plans to monitor progress through annual updates to its Metrics Dashboard where feasible. This ongoing evaluation will support accountability, transparency, and continued advancement of climate resilience and environmental justice goals.

## Additional Resources

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

[Project Overview](#)

[Community Workshop #1 Summary Report](#)

[Pop-Up Exhibit Boards](#)

[Pop-Up Exhibit Informational Handout – English](#)

[Pop-Up Exhibit Informational Handout – Spanish](#)

[Project Webpage](#)

## Further Information

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## About the Adaptation Planning Grant Program (APGP)

*This Project was funded through Round 1 of APGP from 2024-2026. APGP is a part of LCI's ICARP grants portfolio, which distributed \$8 million in funding for adaptation planning efforts across the state.*