

How to Put Equitable Development to Work for Erie, Pennsylvania

Editor's note: Following is part of an ongoing series of JES articles on sustainability issues written by Court Gould, an Erie, Pennsylvania resident and a professional in the field.

By Court Gould, MPA

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed stark disparities in communities nationwide. It has also illuminated shortcomings of some traditional labels. Clearer than ever is that what too often passes as “economic development” really does not lift all boats. The rising tide most often does not trickle down and too many don't have a boat to catch it to begin with. The pandemic has displayed that as inequities persist along with rising costs in the long run. The remedy is making sure investments are accountable to the reality that nobody wins unless everybody wins as opposed to “winner takes all” sleight of hand. In the pandemic's wake has come embrace of “equitable development” as a superior descriptor and litmus test for impactful investing. Out with economic development and in with equitable development.

Doubling Down on Equity - Erie County Redevelopment Authority

In Erie, Pennsylvania (where disparities are significant*), a fine example of intentional effort to not repeat equitable development misses of the past is occurring at the Erie County Redevelopment Authority (ECRDA). Under Chief Executive Tina Mengine, who took the helm in September 2019, the authority is increasingly vocal about inviting the public to evaluate the investments the authority makes against equitable development values.

*Home to the [poorest ZIP](#) code in the country (16501), the situation in the city of Erie is extreme. [Census Reporter](#) indicates 45 percent (2019 census data) of youth under 18 years live in poverty. Even worse, [City-Data.com](#) highlights the crisis in reporting 71.9 percent of Erie's 5-year-old male children live below the poverty level.

In recounting the ECRDA's commitments, Tina Mengine states, “I believe we have a responsibility to ensure that we are participating in and helping to lead the way for all our citizens to achieve success. A strong and healthy community benefits all of us and makes us more attractive for investment and growth.”

Some of ECRDA's recent examples of equitably investing money include:

- Prior to the pandemic, ECRDA began an intentional effort to establish a Diversity Loan Fund to increase access to capital for small and diverse business ownership as a way to help build wealth

Equitable development is a positive development strategy that ensures everyone participates in and benefits from the region's economic transformation – especially low-income residents, communities of color, immigrants, and others at risk of being left behind. It requires an intentional focus on eliminating racial inequities and barriers, and making accountable and catalytic investments to assure that lower-wealth residents:

- live in healthy, safe, opportunity-rich neighborhoods that reflect their culture (and are not displaced from them)
- connect to economic and ownership opportunities
- have voice and influence in the decisions that shape their neighborhoods

Source: [Equitable Development: The Path to an All-In Pittsburgh](#)

within the community and redress obstacles for growth among minority and women-owned business that too often are turned away from traditional lenders. The fund is now capitalized at \$1.25 million with intentions to continue to seek new sources of funds to increase the total amount available. The first loan went to Blue Rock Construction, a black-owned construction firm for \$35,000 in August 2021. Since that time, there have been 19 applications with nine funded thus far. Four Black-owned businesses (two of which were female Black-owned), two Latino, one New American, and two Female-owned businesses.

- ECRDA is committed to minority hiring on two specific subsidized construction work projects to be completed in early 2022. The goal is for 10 percent of the labor force on the projects to be minorities from the local area. Correspondingly, the authority is committed to support related workforce recruitment, training, and placement to ensure success in meeting the inclusion goals. This workforce pipeline initiative is positioned strategically alongside the above noted Diversity Loan Fund in that [“nurturing of more Black-owned businesses will do more than anything to bring more Blacks into the job sites.”](#)

- In taking an increased role in the city’s revitalization, the authority has prioritized industrial blight in the city. For example, industrial blight was highlighted in the 2016 City of Erie Comprehensive Plan and is noted for placing undue burden (social, economic, environmental) on surrounding communities. Properties in the urban core are targeted with the intent to address longstanding blight, uplift neighborhoods, improve safety, and create new local opportunities for investment and jobs in the very neighborhoods that need it the most. Among the initial investments and projects are the following current examples of this commitment:

- Remediation of seven acres at West 15th and Cherry streets, where abandoned buildings will be removed, the land environmentally remediated, and new construction with job opportunities will follow when the project is completed.
- Demolition and remediation of 5.5 acres at East 16th and French and Holland streets that projected a severe case of blight at a former roofing paper plant. Materials were made with asbestos and it sat vacant for 40 years across from a neighborhood featuring affordable housing.
- Provide project management and partnership with the Minority Community Investment Coalition on development of Savocchio Business Park near East 18th and Downing.

These actions represent leadership for ensuring that public funds yield impacts that directly lift communities that have been historically neglected. It is noteworthy that this leadership is occurring within a municipal authority, a form of independent local government that typically flies under the radar of public scrutiny.

Authorities and Accountability

Erie County handles its community investment business through many layers of government. For example, there are many local municipal authorities. Pennsylvania has more than 2,600 authorities. As noted by the PA Governor’s Center for Local Government Services, authorities are governmental bodies. They exist to finance and/or operate specific public works projects without tapping the general taxing powers of the municipality. [The Municipality Authorities Act of 1945](#) further states that authorities are authorized to acquire, construct, finance, improve, maintain and operate projects, provide financing for insurance reserves, make loans, and to borrow money and issue bonds to finance them.

Erie relies upon numerous authorities:

City Authorities:

City of Erie Housing Authority
Erie-Western PA Port Authority
Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority
Erie Sewer Authority
Erie City Water Authority (Erie Water Works)
Erie Parking Authority

In public administration circles, authorities are often referred to as the invisible governments. They have profound impact on development of our communities and on our wallets but little public oversight beginning with appointed rather than elected board members. With regard to equitable development, it is likely all authorities will state that all members of the public are served equally and have equal opportunity to attend meetings and have their voices heard. However, serving members of the public equally is different from doing so equitably.

City of Erie Redevelopment Authority

County Authorities

Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA)
Erie County Hospital Authority
Erie County Convention Center Authority (Erie Events)
Erie Regional Airport Authority
Erie County Redevelopment Authority
Erie County Housing Authority
Erie County General Authority
Erie County Community Services Financing Authority
Erie County Industrial Development Authority

“Allegations have been made that authorities operate without sufficient attention to the needs, wants and complaints of the citizens they serve and tend to act arbitrarily to accomplish their purposes. The authorities respond that all authority board meetings are open to the public, and under the 1998 amendment to the Sunshine Act, the authority board (as well as municipal governing bodies) must hear public comments from those attending the meeting prior to taking official action.”

The City of Austin, Texas has seen the positive effects of engaging public officials and employees in exploring this point of equal vs. equitable. The city created an Equity Assessment Tool to identify and remedy inequitable policies, practices, and procedures. The tool assesses institutional department culture and policy, community engagement, and resource allocation. As reported by the [Austin Chief Equity Officer](#):

Source: [Municipal Authorities in Pennsylvania, PA Governor’s Center for Local Government Services](#)

“A benefit of going through the equity assessments is that City staff begin to shift their thinking about serving residents of Austin equitably instead of equally. Well-meaning departments asserted that they serve all residents equally because the same service is available for all, or they don’t discriminate, or their processes are blind. While at the surface level it appears that everyone has the same opportunity to access services, after closer inspection it became clear that some services departments provide may unintentionally benefit, harm or marginalize certain community members over others.”

And, “Finally, departments identified policies that inadvertently advantage those with higher resources, such as the way that rates are set, or who gets selected for small grant programs. The exposure of these issues is key for departments going through the assessment process as it reveals systemic limitations that are difficult to change, but cannot be easily ignored.”

All the authorities in Erie, including the city and county themselves, are ripe to undergo an equitable development assessment and add their own commitments to those modeled by the Erie County Redevelopment Authority. See the recommendations below for an example of such an equitable development assessment that is focused on equity in investments made by governing bodies.

In the move to be more accountable to lifting communities, the work of the Erie County Redevelopment Authority is in good company of numerous other promising commitments. Another point of progress came in September 2020 when Erie County Council declared racism a public health crisis and council members expressed their intention to address the health, education, housing, and economic disparities existing in Erie County. Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper was quoted in the [Erie Times-News](#) saying, it is the “first step” in addressing myriad issues facing the Black community. “It’s time for Erie County government to walk the talk, to commit its resources to openly and honestly address racism and to improve health care, safe and affordable housing, well-paying jobs, business ownership opportunities, educational opportunities and more for all residents. In order to effect change, we need to start with positive policy changes and to uphold our mission,

vision and values of Erie County government.”

These sentiments are being carried forward in Erie’s resolve to deploy federal rescue funds to foster equitable development as demonstrated in the recent empaneling of the [Erie County Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission](#). Its purpose, in accordance with the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, is to organize a structure that will invest in racially diverse populations by granting funding that creates opportunities for minority populations, lobbies for inclusive policy, and empowers minority populations throughout Erie County while adhering to the ARPA guidelines and policies. Similarly, at the city of Erie, Mayor Joe Sember has appointed a [Fiscal Recovery Council of Advisors](#) to bring in diverse perspectives to make wise investments and build a diversified portfolio ensuring that federal rescue plan funds meet expectations for an equitable recovery and transformation of the city.

These initiatives are tribute to governance systems waking up to the evidence made clear by the pandemic that the benefits of new growth and development will not automatically trickle down to poor and working-class residents. Erie’s prospects to build back better depends on an “all-in Erie” inclusive approach in which every person is afforded the opportunity to live and work to their productive potential. The Covid crisis demands public actions transcend economic development of old in favor of measured commitment and accountability to equitable development.

Recommendations: Recommendation 1. Public Engagement

All of Erie’s official governance bodies are required to engage the public, make meetings accessible, and invite input. The following is an inventory of some of new initiatives and existing entities where the public can engage. This information is intended to help interested members of the public to become informed and involved, especially related to emerging planning and spending in response to the influx of funds via the American Rescue Plan Act and other new or pending sources.

• City of Erie

Authorities, Boards and Commissions

Provides information on each entity, members, meeting dates, and more. Also provides an application to be considered for appointment to become a member.

<https://cityof.erie.pa.us/authorities-boards-and-commissions/>

City of Erie, Fiscal Recovery Council of Advisors

Information on this new entity being created to provide guidance and feedback on the availability of programs, grants, and loans developed as part of the American Rescue Plan Act for an equitable recovery and transformation of the City for future generations.

Contact: Jacqueline Spry, American Rescue Plan Program Manager, Department of Planning and Neighborhood Resources, City of Erie. jspry@erie.pa.us

<https://www.goerie.com/story/news/politics/government/2021/08/20/arp-funding-plan-erie-76-m-allocation-plans-how-use-covid-stimulus-money/8191901002/>

• Erie County

Board and Authorities

Provides links to each entity.

<https://eriecountypa.gov/open-government/boards-and-authorities/>

Erie County American Rescue Plan Act

Reports on total ARP allocations and planned allocations within the county.

<https://eriecountypa.gov/open-government/american-rescue-plan-act/>
<https://bit.ly/eccovidplan>

Erie County Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commission

Overview and contract information for the commission which serves to organize a structure which will invest in racially diverse populations by granting funding that creates opportunities for minority populations, lobbies for inclusive policy, and empowers minority populations throughout Erie County while adhering to the American Rescue Plan Act ARPA guidelines and policies.

Contact: Board Chairperson, Gerald Blanks gblanks@geedc.org

<https://eriecountypa.gov/departments/county-executives-office/initiatives/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-commission/>

Erie County, Community Future Center

To be housed in the Erie County Department of Planning and Community Development, the Community Future Center will provide guidance and assistance on ARPA eligible projects, review and align existing plans and programs to meet the needs of Erie County residents and organizations, educate and advise on meaningful deployment of current and future federal and state funding throughout the community for the greatest long-term impact.

Contact: Honey Stempka, Erie County Department of Planning and Community Development
hstempka@eriecountypa.gov

Recommendation 2. Erie Equitable Development Screen

In preparation for Erie's building back better, a shared commitment is growing to ensure investments are prioritized that build wealth for low-income, communities of color. The success in leveraging resources is predicated on engaging and uplifting historically marginalized communities and redressing longstanding inequities.

Toward achieving equitable expenditure of public funds, it is recommended the following tool be adopted by all public entities that provide subsidy for community or business development. This is a screen or set of project evaluation and prioritization criteria for use in assessing the potential of proposed projects to accelerate equitable development. Each item is posed as a question or action to meet in the affirmative.

Public Participation

- The racial demographics and socio-economic status of those to be affected by the project have been thoroughly assessed and identified.

- Local residents (especially those who have historically been underrepresented) to be affected by the project have been engaged in the project's scoping and impact assessment and in discussing and planning, and will be engaged throughout implementation.

- A committee that includes representation of local residents is being assembled in order to track the implementation of the project, assess impacts, and provide community feedback from start to finish.

- A plan is in place to report impacts to the affected community.

- Local community organizations have been engaged and existing strategic plans have been assessed to evaluate appropriate consistency with the project.

Impact

- The project has been assessed for its social, economic, and environmental impact with special attention to that affecting diverse persons and their places. This assessment will examine how the project will increase or decrease racial equity, identify potential unintended consequences and positive benefits that may result. It will include review of the intensity and duration of impacts.
- Processes and investments have been identified to mitigate the negative impacts. This includes involvement of those persons/communities impacted.
- Impacts will also be assessed relative to effects of current actions on the fair and just distribution of benefits and burdens to future generations of communities and employees. Examples include income and wealth, health outcomes, privilege, resource depletion, climate change and pollution, real estate redlining practices, and species extinction.

Outcomes

- A process is in place to quantify impacts across measures such as: generating wealth and ownership positions for disadvantaged persons, living wage jobs created, the number of dedicated affordable housing units created or preserved, investments in minority/disadvantaged/women-owned businesses, vacant structure repurposing, and critical services available to vulnerable populations. And other factors addressed in this overall document.

Location

- The project is located in a federal Opportunity Zone or other formally designated area per concentration of residents characterized by low income, unemployment, poverty, minority, high household rents or mortgages greater compared to income, low education attainment, etc.
- The site is served by public transportation and bike/pedestrian friendly/accessible.

Employment

- One way the project will bring economic opportunity and vitality to disinvested communities is through commitment (with verification methodology) to employ at least 10 percent of local, low income, POC/ minorities/refugees/New Americans/immigrants in jobs to be created in, by, for the project.
- Programs are in place to recruit, train, place, and monitor success of local hires.
- The project will create jobs that will pay a family sustaining wage as defined by the [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#) and provide benefits and workers' rights in safe and healthy working conditions.
- Workforce development services are in place to ensure skills training in step with the demands of the jobs to be created by the project such that local hiring is facilitated.
- Transportation has been assessed and is available to ensure local hires can easily get to the job site from adjacent neighborhoods with high levels of social need.
- Contracts for goods and services will be prioritized for fulfillment by local, low-income, persons of color.

Environmental

- The project has been assessed to decrease and not add environmental burden to the community (air, water, noise, smell, traffic, soil, food, green space, traffic speeds per bike/ped safety, light pollution, etc.) and there is not a disproportionate negative impact on environmental justice communities.

building performance and providing renewable resources. ‘

- The project, as relevant to type of development, will be built to LEED, Well Building, Passive House, Living Building Challenge, etc. standards to ensure best practice in health and environmental impact.
- The project will reduce the built environment’s energy consumption and climate impacts by improving
- The project prioritizes brownfields and blighted properties vs. places never previously developed. It will reactivate abandoned, derelict, distressed, and inactive lots to return them to productive use, combat blight, and generate revenue.

Community Development

- Local residents will not be displaced by the project.
- Concerns for gentrification are balanced with need for increasing vitality of the central business district whose market rise will benefit adjacent neighborhoods.
- Rents of new housing to be created includes a mix of market rate, middle- and low-income/affordable housing opportunities.
- The project brings a mix of uses and is contextually consistent with the surroundings toward positive place making.
- The project will increase services available to vulnerable populations such as affordable transportation options, health-care facilities, healthy food retail, childcare, quality education services, etc.

Public Policy

- Assessment has been conducted to identify possible public policy shortcomings of the past that contribute to the present need for the project investment.
- Specific policies have been identified whose implementation would leverage and multiply the positive impacts that will be made by the project going forward and to help redress past shortcomings that made the project a priority in the present. A policy implementation plan is being developed with affected parties at the table.

Sources:

Guiding Principles for Opportunity Zones, Bruce Katz and Jeremy Nowak

https://www.thenewlocalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Guiding-Principles-for-Opportunity-Zones_The-NewLocalism_March92018.pdf

PolicyLink: Racial Equity Impact Assessments

<https://allincities.org/toolkit/racial-equity-impact-assessments>

race forward: Racial Equity Impact Assessment

https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/RacialJusticeImpactAssessment_v5.pdf

Flagship Opportunity Zone Guiding Principles

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/flagship-opportunity-zone-development-company-guiding-brett-wiler>

Seattle: Racial Equity Toolkit to Assess Policies, Initiatives, Programs, and Budget Issues

http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/RSJI/RacialEquityToolkit_FINAL_August2012.pdf

City of St. Paul, MN Racial equity assessment toolkit

<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/practice/resources/equitylibrary/stpaul-assessmentkit.html>

King County: 2015 Equity Impact Review Process Overview

https://kingcounty.gov/~media/elected/executive/equity-social-justice/2016/The_Equity_Impact_Review_checklist_Mar2016.ashx?la=en

Pittsburgh p4 Performance Measures

http://www.p4pittsburgh.org/media/W1siZiIsIjIwMTgvMDIvMDUvMmg1ZmptcWQ2dV9wNF9QZXJmb-3JtYW5jZV9NZWFzdXJlc18yMDE4LnBkZiJdXQ/p4_Performance_Measures_2018.pdf

Racial Equity Alliance: Equitable Development as a Tool to Advance Racial Equity

<https://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GARE-Equitable-Development.pdf>

About the Author: *Court Gould, who lives in downtown Erie, served 20 years as founding executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh. He established the organization as a leader in accelerating the policy and practice of sustainable development borrowing from cities around the world regarding local strategies for Smart Growth, Regional Equitable Development, DEI, Transportation for Livable Communities, Energy Visioning and Strategy, Outdoor Recreation, Sustainable Community Development, Blight and Abandonment, Sustainable Business Strategies, and more.*

After three years with the Erie Community Foundation as vice president of Community Impact, Gould is a sustainable solutions consultant and certified professional coach. His education includes an MPA from the University of Southern California, and a BA in Political Science from Tufts University. He attended the Stanford Graduate School of Business Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders and earned Professional Coach Certification from Duquesne University.