

Infrastructure and California's Communities

Written and edited by the Building Our Future Infrastructure Opportunity Working Group

To learn more about how the principles were developed, check out the ["Reporting Out: Infrastructure Principles and Aspirations" blog](#) on the Build It Green website.

The list of profound challenges facing California and our state's communities is long and sobering. Across the state, millions of new homes must be built over just the next few years for supply to meet demand and overcome the dire housing shortage that has been rising for decades. As we address our housing shortage, we must also confront the discrimination and institutional racism that has shaped our communities. Some Californians have had their pick of where to live and the opportunity to build wealth through homeownership while the majority who are Black and Brown have both explicitly and functionally been excluded from neighborhoods across the state, denied the benefits of homeownership, and even driven to leave their communities when where they live becomes desirable to those with privilege.

Globally, within a decade, we must take unprecedented action on climate change to avoid its most catastrophic impacts. Here in California, we must not only be a leader in reducing our carbon footprint, but also be innovators in evolving approaches to building and managing communities so both human and natural systems can adapt, survive, and thrive.

It is often not recognized, but these challenges are all interrelated. Effectively addressing them—along with other pressing needs like COVID-19 recovery, workforce issues, health disparities, and more—will require an interwoven, holistic approach to systems change.

Right now, California has an unprecedented opportunity to take a holistic approach and enable our communities to be on the forefront of addressing housing affordability, social equity, and environmental vitality, while also advancing health and prosperity. California is currently in a state of budget health. We have access to long awaited federal infrastructure funds. Together this means California can invest in a new, innovative generation of infrastructure focused on making the neighborhoods we live in thriving, just places that exist in dynamic harmony with natural systems.

The following principles are provided to shepherd investment in California's next generation of community-centered infrastructure. They are offered to guide the opportunity that exists now and how we plan for, and carry out, infrastructure investment for the benefit of our neighborhoods, and the natural environment within which we live, for years to come. They are provided to inspire local, state, and federal entities, along with community-based groups and other non-governmental players, to better align infrastructure related policies, programs, and spending with our shared values. The principles should be treated as evolving and adapting. They can be revised based on what is learned in pursuit of community-centered infrastructure.

Principles of Community-Centered Infrastructure Investment

- **Center decisions around equity and environmental justice**
 - *Prioritize BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and low-income communities for community-centered infrastructure investment.* BIPOC and low-income communities have historically faced and currently face underinvestment and disinvestment. Effective methods of incorporating equity and environmental justice into all infrastructure decisions must be determined and utilized to ensure infrastructure and infill housing projects avoid displacement, don't perpetuate patterns of segregation, and do not undercut the ability to achieve climate goals by forcing people with low incomes into ever-longer commutes.
 - *Elevate community leadership approaches in marginalized communities.* To ensure low-income and BIPOC communities benefit from infrastructure investment, methods for how low-income and BIPOC communities can effectively engage and take the lead on infrastructure decisions must be identified and highlighted. By highlighting these methods, communities across California can learn from each other, adapt strategies to their own circumstances, and develop regenerative capacities that can be applied to a wide variety of community needs.
- **Prioritize homes, community health, and wellness**
 - *Invest in equitable infill housing.* By prioritizing infrastructure to equitably address our housing crisis, and by providing both subsidized and unsubsidized affordable housing in climate-friendly infill locations, including neighborhoods with a history of exclusion driven by structural racism, California can ensure all residents have the most important asset to thrive—a home. Furthermore, compact, infill development has a myriad of other benefits including more efficient infrastructure utilization, lower levels of water and energy use, smaller carbon footprints, and increased capacity for residents to use transit and micromobility. Housing for California's most vulnerable populations (both new homes and rehabilitation of existing homes) ultimately benefits all Californians and therefore can be considered an infrastructure investment for everyone.
 - *Tackle Homelessness.* Investing in capacity to house the unhoused is an infrastructure investment. Investment can provide interim housing options to bring people indoors, permanent affordable housing options, and prevention interventions for those most at risk of experiencing homelessness.
 - *Support housing of all types, and for a wide range of income levels.* By designing infrastructure to support a variety of housing types—including but not necessarily limited to accessory dwelling units, “missing middle housing” (such as duplex, triplexes, fourplexes, and townhomes) and large multi-family—the varied housing needs of California's diverse population can be met. A wide array of housing types enhances housing choices for those who are homeless and low-income advancing from poverty, as well as for middle class households.

- *Prioritize and fund transit, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure for climate and community health.* Transit and micromobility (bicycles, scooter, e-bikes, bike sharing, etc.), along with pedestrian infrastructure, mean clean air in the homes and neighborhoods where Californians live, space for homes, parks, and other community needs rather than auto-oriented infrastructure, greater affordability, and enhanced access to jobs and other amenities. Infrastructure investment to support electric vehicles is also necessary for situations in which transit, micromobility, and walking are infeasible.
- *Support urban greening.* Parks, open spaces, and urban forests support healthy active lifestyles, clean the air and water, and lower the temperature on hot days. Investment should be focused on communities traditionally lacking greenspaces and regions most affected by extreme heat.
- **Support resilient, modern communications and energy infrastructure**
 - *Invest in equitable broadband access.* Work with schools, hospitals, large employers, tribes, and other community institutions to ensure that every Californian has digital access no matter where they live.
 - *Create modern and resilient electric infrastructure.* A safe, reliable electricity grid, powered by zero-carbon energy sources, is essential to creating the homes, businesses, transportation systems, and communities for which California strives. Grid modernization will also help protect the state from the deadly wildfires that have ravaged California in recent years. Community-centered infrastructure also includes microgrids and other community-level energy strategies as part of the transition to a resilient system.
- **Advance equitable communities through green economic development**
 - *Develop green workforce training programs.* Invest in workforce training apprenticeships and job creation/just transition strategies to build the infrastructure for a carbon neutral economy, create economic opportunity for underserved communities, and accelerate clean, resource-saving economic development opportunities.
 - *Provide high-quality careers to those in the infrastructure workforce.* Building community-focused infrastructure should not merely result in jobs. Rather, building infrastructure should support careers that enable workers representing the diversity of California to be part of the middle-class, enjoy strong benefits, and develop skills that enable the pursuit of life aspirations.
 - *Expand programs to reduce utility bills and create equitable, green jobs.* Programs to increase energy and water efficiency, equitable residential electrification, water-reuse, water quality in underserved communities, cool surfaces, urban greening, and renewable-energy measures are holistic infrastructure investments that create jobs and economic opportunity. Infill development in walkable/bikeable communities is inherently energy, water, and carbon efficient, thus reducing utility and transportation costs.

- **Invest in natural and agricultural lands.** Support for the preservation and stewardship of “natural infrastructure” complements infill development/rehabilitation of existing homes and serves our communities in so many ways, from carbon sequestration to protecting Californians from wildfires, floods, sea level rise, and other natural disasters, and much more. “Natural infrastructure” can enable human communities and natural ecosystems to co-evolve and together adapt to future changes that cannot be currently predicted.
- **Grow resources for infrastructure.** Resource scarcity is not an acceptable excuse for under investment in projects consistent with the above principles. Government leaders, finance experts, advocates and others must develop creative ways to “grow the pie” so that community-centered infrastructure needs can be met. The efficient use of resources should be achieved through retooling existing programs, reallocating funds, and reforms to reduce the cost of community-centered infrastructure.
- **Avoid investment in projects not consistent with the spirit of the above principles.** Carefully review infrastructure funding and financing (of all types from transportation and water to gas pipelines) with an eye toward forgoing projects that increase community risk, further inequity and institutional racism, exacerbate housing affordability challenges, and/or are unsustainable environmentally.