



Creating a Circular Cleveland

As part of the Cities Taking Action to Address Health, Equity, and Climate Change Initiative, Cleveland was one of six U.S. cities that received support from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) and C40 Cities to create transformative community-led projects.

Health, equity and climate risks in Cleveland

The City of Cleveland is located in Northeast Ohio, on the southern shore of Lake Erie and the mouth of the Cuyahoga River. Cleveland has been a vital U.S. hub for commerce, transportation, manufacturing, and industries including steel and iron.

Industrialisation and economic growth attracted large numbers of immigrants and migrants looking for jobs and opportunities, including African Americans during the Great Migration. This is reflected in Cleveland today, with a population of nearly 50% African American, 32% white and 13% Hispanic or Latinx.

While the booming industries meant economic opportunity for some, many communities have been burdened with pollution and [poor air quality](#). The city was ranked the [fourth worst U.S. city](#) for asthma sufferers in 2023, and extensive [elevated blood lead levels](#) have been found in children.

Environmental activists in Cleveland have campaigned tirelessly to address these conditions. The Cuyahoga River in Cleveland was once a dumping ground for industry waste and [caught fire more than a dozen times](#) in the 1960s. The campaign to clean up the river and improve conditions for Cleveland residents inspired the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the eventual passage of the federal [Clean Water Act](#).

More recently, Cleveland has been working to build a thriving and resilient city with its 2013 and 2018 [Cleveland Climate Action Plans](#). This work has been the foundation for the Circular Cleveland project.

What is Circular Cleveland?

Circular Cleveland is a collaborative effort to refashion the local economy of Cleveland and address the effects of waste and pollution on residents' health. Led by Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, the City of Cleveland, and Neighborhood Connections, Circular Cleveland is a collaboration between community organisations, businesses and engaged residents.

The goals of the project are to:

- redesign systems to use natural resources more efficiently
- create jobs and investment opportunities
- support and protect a healthier environment for residents now and in the future

A circular economy is a system where no materials or goods are wasted thanks to maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, recycling, and composting. The Circular Cleveland team is working to create a circular economy in Cleveland that both involves and benefits residents.

What has Circular Cleveland achieved so far?

Circular Cleveland Roadmap

Cleveland Neighborhood Progress and the City of Cleveland commissioned a [landscape analysis](#) to understand which sectors contribute most to waste and pollution in Cleveland. The report was developed by circular economy consultants Metabolic alongside partners PXYERA Global and the Council for the Great Lakes Region. It includes a 'materials flow analysis' which documents levels of consumption – for example, energy, water, and materials – as well as emissions and waste produced in the region.

The coalition used this analysis along with conversations with many local stakeholders to identify which circular strategies could have the most impact to reduce consumption and pollution, and developed the report [Circular Cleveland: A roadmap towards an inclusive, circular city](#).

Circular Cleveland has centred on community engagement and

ownership. As the report highlights: “While mitigating climate change and eliminating waste and pollution are critical components of the city’s circular vision, authentically and meaningfully engaging local community members to be the owners and drivers of the recommended strategy is a hallmark of Circular Cleveland.”

The roadmap was developed through a year-long process during which residents, community organisations, and sector stakeholders were consulted and engaged through a series of workshops with its consultants which lead to the four focus areas and relevant strategies. The four focus areas identified were:

- circular manufacturing
- circular built environment
- remediating pollution
- getting more value from resources

Circular Cleveland Community Grants

Since April 2021, 37 circular economy-focused grants have been awarded to engaged residents and community organisations whose work contributes to creating a circular economy in Cleveland. These include ‘Cleveland Sews the NFL Draft’ led by [Cleveland Sews](#), which repurposes materials from the National Football League (NFL) Draft into accessories and as training materials for community-based sewing education programmes. Another grant-winning project is ‘Renew the Earth’ – a composting programme in a community garden open to the public, led by the [Ben Franklin Community Garden](#).

The Circular Cleveland Grant Making Committee is made up of residents who live in Cleveland and East Cleveland, responsible for deciding [which groups receive the grant funding](#).

Small Business Awards

Circular Cleveland has also partnered with SCORE Cleveland to award three prizes of US\$10,000 to small businesses launching and incubating ideas that adopt circular economy principles. The winners of the awards received mentorship and access to other financial resources.

The winners of the [Circular Cleveland Business Incubation Grants](#) are:

- [Table for 2](#), a furniture repair and repurposing business located in the Detroit Shoreway neighbourhood.
- [Wake Robin](#), a newly reorganised fermented food company establishing a bottle washing operation to reuse and recirculate their bottles, located in the Stockyards neighbourhood.
- **Your Refilling Station**, a plastic-free beauty and bath products retailer located in the West Park neighbourhood.

Community Ambassador Programme

The Circular Cleveland Team appointed 10 [Circular Cleveland Ambassadors](#) representing different geographic neighbourhoods, communities, and associations in the City of Cleveland. From the beginning of the project, the ambassadors have played a key role in being champions of circularity within their communities across several Cleveland neighbourhoods.

The ambassadors provided input to inform the Circular Cleveland Roadmap, served as liaisons between the Circular Cleveland leadership team and their community, and connected community members with resources to help support this work. The community of ambassadors and grantees built the foundation for and worked to involve other community members in programmes including the Fix-it CLE repair workshops.

Fix-It CLE Repair Workshops

The [Fix-It CLE Repair Workshops](#) provide a space for Cleveland residents to gather as a community and learn or hone their skills to repair different types of household items, including clothes and small appliances. Through partnerships with the Cuyahoga County Solid Waste District and Sears think[box] at Case Western Reserve University, Fix-it CLE workshops have been held twice a month since July 2022. More than 111 items have been fixed over 25 Fix-it CLE events.

Divya Sridhar, Manager of Climate Resiliency and Sustainability with CNP said, “The Fix-it CLE repair workshops – by helping people repair and reuse their products and materials and keep them out of landfill for longer – are

a great example of partners working together to build a circular economy.”

Composting Pilot

The City of Cleveland has introduced its first composting programme at a city-owned facility. The City has joined forces with [Rust Belt Riders Composting](#) (RBR) and the [Hunger Network](#) at the West Side Market to create a food rescue programme. The market is a vibrant historic landmark and the oldest operating market space in Cleveland. The programme distributes leftover edible food to local organisations serving those most in need and diverts food waste to be composted and turned into soil. So far, 5,000 lbs of food waste from the market has been diverted from landfill.

Through these various initiatives, the City of Cleveland and Cleveland Neighborhood Progress are working to cultivate community leaders and organisations in advancing a more sustainable, healthier, and just Cleveland.

This project team included the leadership and participation of the following people (in alphabetical order): Cathi Lehn (City of Cleveland), Divya Sridhar (Cleveland Neighborhood Progress), Stephanie Howse (City of Cleveland Council member), and the [Circular Cleveland Ambassadors](#).

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