



Duwamish Valley Resilience District, Seattle

As part of the Cities Taking Action to Address Health, Equity, and Climate Change Initiative, Seattle 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 Seattle

Seattle is Washington State's largest city, situated on Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest. Surrounded by water, mountains and evergreen forests, Seattle has long been home to a range of industries including logging, shipbuilding and aircraft manufacturing.

Seattle still has one of the largest ports in North America. This industrial activity has led to extensive levels of pollution. In 2001, the Duwamish River was identified by the U.S. government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a [contaminated site](#) that must be cleaned up and restored.

The Duwamish Valley is a homeland of Coastal Salish tribes past and present, who have cared for the land since time immemorial. More recently, Seattle has become a centre for some of the largest technological companies leading it to an economic revival and drastic population growth, making it one of the [fastest growing](#) cities in the U.S..

This population growth has resulted in long-time residents [being pushed out](#) as it becomes more expensive to live in the city. Seattle is currently the [third most gentrifying city](#) in the U.S. Two of the most affected neighbourhoods are Georgetown and South Park in Duwamish Valley, where median home value increased an average of [47% between 2000 and 2013](#).

Neighbourhoods where many people live in poverty are more vulnerable to displacement. In Georgetown and South Park, [27% and 50%](#) of residents, respectively, live in poverty.

Inequality in Seattle is compounded by annual seasonal flood risks due to the worsening climate crisis. An extreme high tide event in December 2022 flooded South Park, displaced around 40 residents, and damaged homes and businesses. The flooding is only set to get worse with continued sea-level rise.

What is the Duwamish Valley Resilience District?

To confront these environmental and economic challenges and improve residents' quality of life, the City of Seattle and community members developed the [Duwamish Valley Action Plan](#) in 2018. The Action Plan is a vision for environmental justice and equitable development in the region. It focuses on near and mid-term investments the City could make in partnership with the community to address long-standing needs and priorities, as well as long-term strategies that require holistic approaches.

During a two-year long visioning process from 2018-2020, a coalition convened to identify how to implement the Action Plan's long-term strategies for anti-displacement, workforce development, climate adaptation, access to open space, and improving health outcomes.

The coalition was made up of partners including the Center for Community Investment, [Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition](#), Seattle Public Utilities (SPU), Seattle's Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE), Seattle's Office of Planning & Community Development (OPCD), Seattle's Office of Economic Development (OED), and The Seattle Foundation.

This partnership outlined a proposal to establish a Resilience District to implement many of the long-term goals in the plan. This was motivated by residents' concerns about an unintended, harmful impact: displacement that could result from investments intended to improve the Duwamish Valley and benefit people's emotional and physical health.

Building on the action plan, the City of Seattle convened the [Duwamish Valley Resilience District advisory group](#). The 17 advisory group members represent diverse communities and interests, including from the two

priority neighbourhoods – South Park and Georgetown – as well as community-based organisations, an affordable housing association, and industrial business representatives and landowners. The advisory group fosters shared decision-making and community action against displacement and sea level rise.

What has the Duwamish Valley Resilience District achieved so far?

The Duwamish Valley Resilience District advisory group convenes to learn about and inform local climate breakdown adaptation and mitigation efforts. Through community engagement, the group involves residents in planning and implementing positive change in Duwamish Valley.

Inspired by climate action in other cities, the Duwamish Valley Resilience District Advisory Group and City of Seattle Advisors – Alberto J. Rodríguez and David Goldberg – selected three main categories to focus on:

1. Community coordination and cross-sector collaboration – inspired by [Proyecto ENLACE del Caño Martín Peña in Puerto Rico](#).
2. Sea-level rise adaptation and mitigation strategies – inspired by [Ōtākaro Avon River Corridor of Regenerate Christchurch in New Zealand](#).
3. Finance and funding – inspired by [Água Espraiada Urban Operation in São Paulo, Brazil](#).

With support of expert consultants, the advisory group has developed guiding decision-making principles for future Resilience District initiatives and engaged in training and discussions about racial equity. The group also learned about what sea-level rise means for Duwamish Valley, and what adaptation and mitigation responses are available, including sea walls, berm (raised land barriers), pumps, habitat, and drainage.

Based on the ideas shared during the meetings, the consultants are researching options for Duwamish Valley that are both feasible and aligned with the guiding principles.

Community engagement

These ideas were also used as a launchpad for community engagement in

South Park and Georgetown, to educate and exchange ideas with residents and businesses.

The team has hosted six community events, including a 'multilingual open house' involving 78 residents. Interpreters attended and translated for residents in four languages – Spanish, Somali, Khmer, and Vietnamese. Residents were invited to learn and share ideas about the advisory group's work streams, including sea-level rise strategies, the Resilience District guiding principles, and finance and funding.

During a community asset and power-mapping exercise at the event, residents shared organisations and services they believe are assets in their community, and identified what resource gaps exist to make their communities more resilient to climate breakdown.

To reach more people in these neighbourhoods, the City has collaborated with community groups like the Duwamish Valley Youth Corps to help spread the word on the Resilience District and the events it is organising. During the Youth Corps youth forum, members presented information about the Resilience District advisory group work streams to their families, peers and neighbours. They also worked with the University of Washington and young people to do a [door-knocking campaign](#) to assess community preparedness for emergencies.

Based on input from residents, the team will develop recommendations on sea-level rise mitigation infrastructure and policy for the City of Seattle – ranging from affordable housing, business and workforce development strategies, land use changes, financing mechanisms and new community-led organisations to advance resilience.

The Duwamish Valley Resilience District project has brought together a cross-sectoral coalition of people bringing to life their vision for an environmentally just and equitable Duwamish Valley. In the face of the climate crisis and its challenges, they have set the foundation for action and organisation by the community, for the community.

This project team included the leadership and participation of the following people (in alphabetical order): Alberto J. Rodríguez (City of Seattle), Ann Grodnik-Nagle (Seattle Public Utilities), David Goldberg (City of Seattle), Paulina López (Duwamish River Community Coalition), Priya Saxena (Equitable Future), Sally Gillis (Seattle Foundation), Tracy Tackett (Seattle Public Utilities), and the Resilience District Advisory Group members.

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