

Executive Summary

The [Fairfax County Strategic Plan](#), adopted in 2021, states that while Fairfax County is a great place to live, work, play and learn, persistent racial and social inequities are resulting in community outcome disparities. There is a connection between persistent disparities and land use policy. For example, access to housing, safe and convenient transportation and sidewalks or lack thereof, and the risk of displacement are all contributing factors to place-based outcomes across Fairfax County.

Building on the county's Strategic Plan and the One Fairfax Policy, this white paper defines equitable development, highlights how land use policies can exacerbate or alleviate these disparities, provides alignment of equitable development with adopted County policy, and reviews examples of equitable development policies from other jurisdictions. To advance equity, the paper recommends incorporating policies informed by data and analytical tools into the county's Comprehensive Plan Policy Plan, targeting disparities and mitigating displacement risks to create communities of opportunity that promote fairness, justice, and inclusive economic growth across Fairfax County.

Definition

The [One Fairfax Policy](#), adopted in 2017, defines equity as “the commitment to promote fairness and justice in the formation of public policy that results in all residents – regardless of age, race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, marital status, disability, socio-economic status or neighborhood of residence or other characteristics – having opportunity to fully participate in the region’s economic vitality, contribute to its readiness for the future, and connect to its assets and resources.” The One Fairfax policy commits the county to consider equity when planning, developing, and implementing policies, practices, and initiatives. The Board has directed staff to incorporate the One Fairfax policy into the update to the Comprehensive Plan Policy Plan.

In 2020, the [Chairman’s Task Force on Race and Equity](#) was convened to better understand the drivers of inequity and to develop recommendations for accelerating the county’s progress toward becoming One Fairfax. The task force identified five key drivers that need to be addressed to achieve the vision of an equitable Fairfax County. The key driver “Equitable Community Development” was defined by the Task Force with a vision: “Fairfax County is a place where all people live in communities of opportunity with the ability to engage fully in decisions that affect their lives and neighborhoods.”

At its March 2024 meeting, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Government (COG) Board of Directors (including Fairfax County Supervisors Lusk and Walkinshaw) adopted the [Regional](#)

[Equitable Development Principles](#) to help guide local governments in advancing equity through comprehensive plans. The principles, focused on both process and outcomes, are intended to serve as a regional model and can help inform standards for local governments to implement equitable development processes and policies through land use planning and housing actions.

Regional Equitable Development Principles

Process principles:

- 1. Acknowledge history and repair past harms
- 2. Practice inclusive and meaningful community engagement
- 3. Commit to Internal capacity with community transparency

Policy outcomes principles:

- 4. Advance economic mobility and opportunity
- 5. Prevent residential, commercial, and cultural displacement
- 6. Expand affordable housing options and preserve existing affordability
- 7. Support and strengthen diverse community values
- 8. Promote people-centered multi-modal mobility and connectivity
- 9. Develop healthy and safe communities
- 10. Promote and regulate for environmental justice

(COG Equitable Development Principles, 2024)

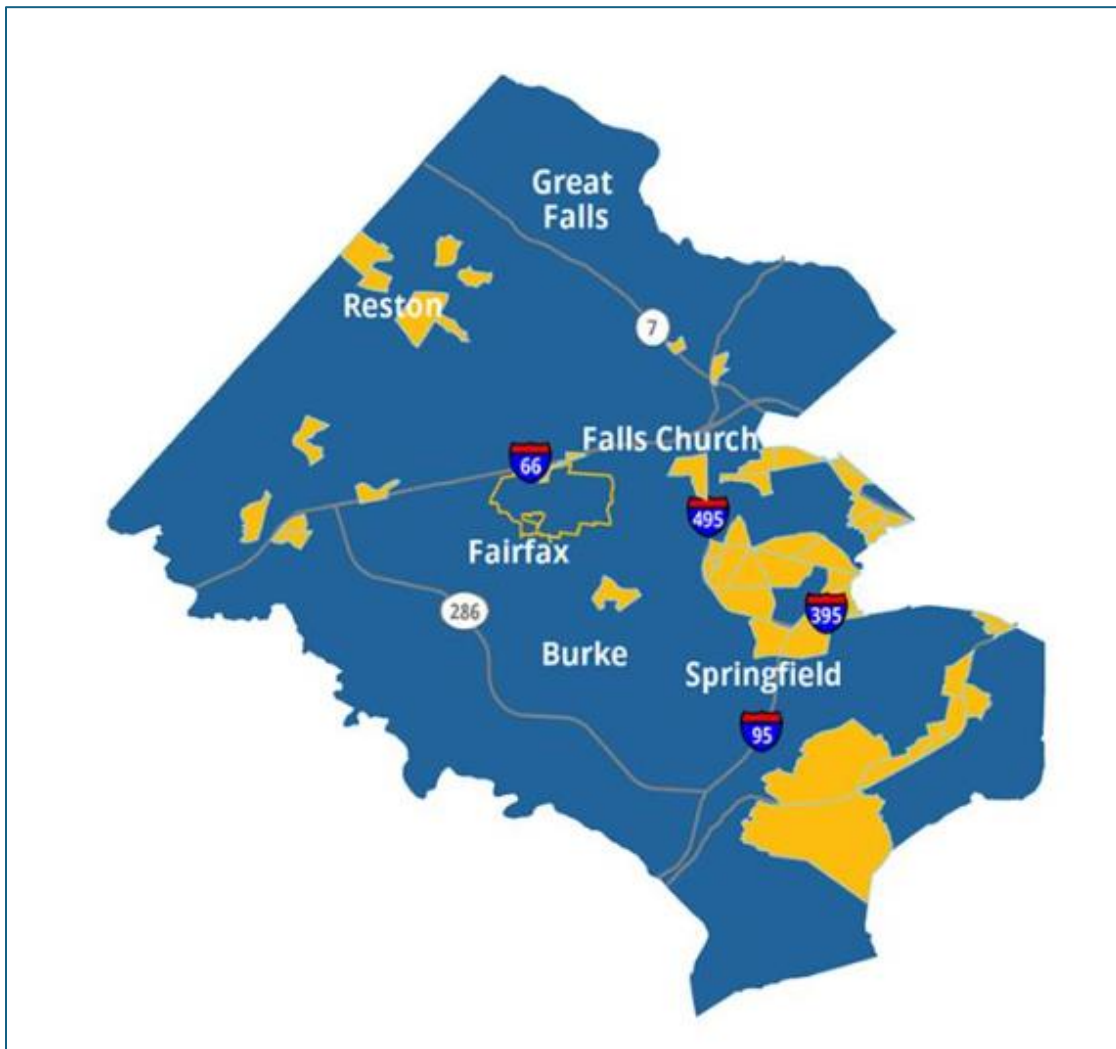
Equitable Development Data

In order to better understand the need for advancing equitable development through the Comprehensive Plan, it is important to consider data-driven findings in Fairfax County that illustrate persistent disparities.

“Uneven Opportunity Landscape”

A 2017 Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) for the Northern Virginia Health Foundation, [Getting Ahead: The Uneven Opportunity Landscape in Northern Virginia](#), has shown there is an uneven opportunity landscape in Fairfax County. The 2017 study identified 15 “islands of disadvantage” -- clusters of census tracts where residents, disproportionately people of color, endure living conditions that take years off their lives. Contributing factors include poverty, low levels of education, lack of affordable housing, and inadequate access to health care. For example, the study referenced two census tracts near Seven Corners and Bailey’s Crossroads, a

population of almost 9,000 persons that had limited education, insufficient economic resources, and inadequate living conditions to meet basic needs or help their children attain a better life.



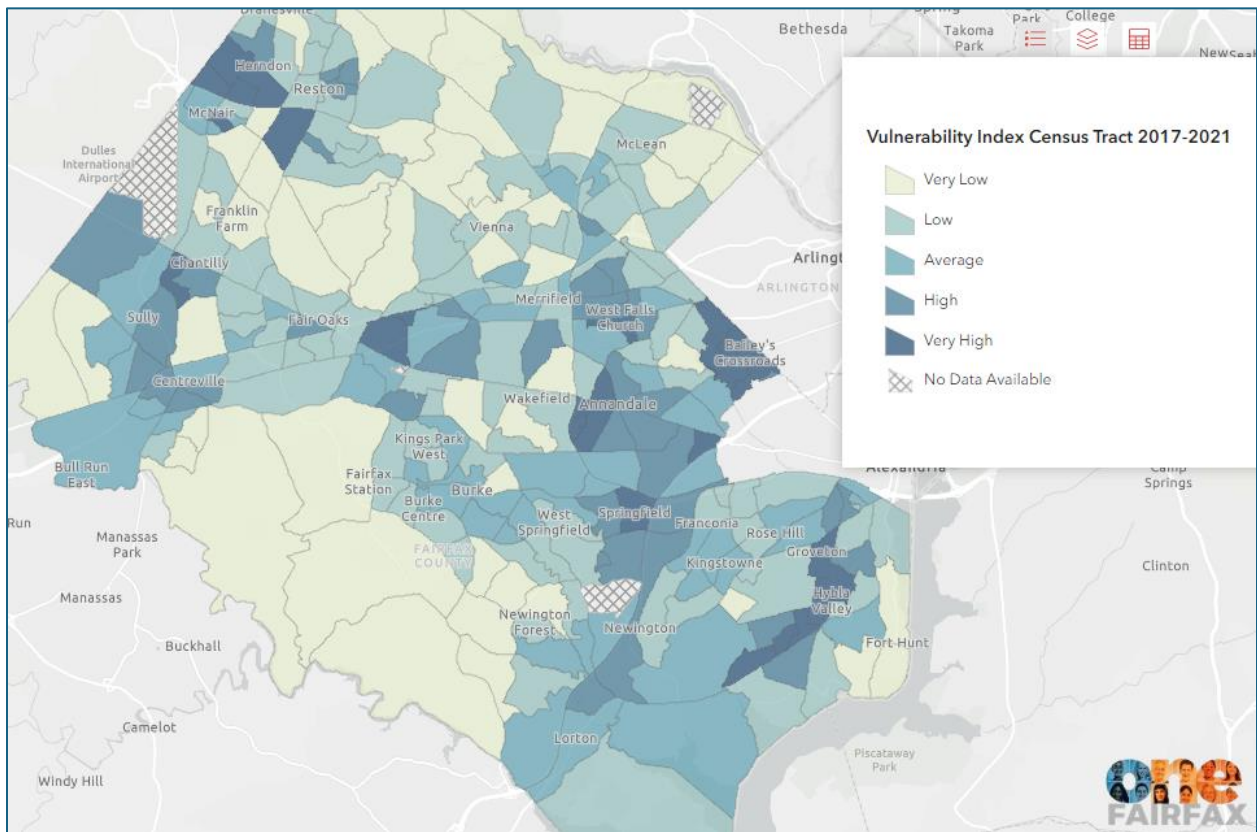
(Getting Ahead: The Uneven Opportunity Landscape in Northern Virginia, 2017)

In November 2023, a follow-up Northern Virginia Health Foundation report titled [“Lost Opportunities: The Persistence of Disadvantaged Neighborhoods in Northern Virginia”](#) found that, although Northern Virginia experienced considerable social and economic progress between 2009 and 2021, when poverty rates fell in 52% of the region’s census tracts, many of the “islands of disadvantage” did not share in this progress. “For example, in one economically marginalized section of Bailey’s Crossroads in Fairfax County, the poverty rate climbed from 17% in 2009-2013 to 30% in 2017-2021. Child poverty nearly doubled, from 32% to 63%. The neighborhood also experienced setbacks in educational attainment and English literacy, employment, and overcrowded housing. These conditions disproportionately affected people of color.” In some areas, progress may more likely reflect the impact of gentrification. One Census tract in Reston, for example, saw a decrease in the poverty rate from 28% to 8% and an increase

in the median household income from \$73,906 to \$95,250, but the share of the population that was White grew from 46% to 55%, while the Hispanic and Black populations declined ([*The Persistence of Disadvantaged Neighborhoods in Fairfax County*](#)).

Vulnerability Index

The [Fairfax County Vulnerability Index](#) shows in dark colors areas in Fairfax County that are the most vulnerable based on occupation, education, language, income, transportation, health insurance, and housing. This tool provides an understanding of which places in Fairfax County have poor outcomes relative to other areas of the county.



[\(Vulnerability Index, 2024\)](#)

Comprehensive Plan History

The existing Comprehensive Plan Policy Plan does not directly reference equitable development, although many policies support the COG equitable development principles. For example, the county has a strong and evolving affordable housing program aimed at preserving or producing affordable housing opportunities throughout the county. Additionally, promoting multi-modal mobility and connectivity has been the preferred development pattern for Fairfax County for many years. Other principles such as preventing residential, commercial and cultural displacement do not have clear strategies for implementation in the county.

The first time the word “equity” is explicitly included in an Area Plan was in 2023, when the Fairfax County Board adopted an updated [Reston Comprehensive Plan](#). The update included a set of equitable development principles for the Reston community, with a vision to promote “inclusive growth, diverse housing options, and access to community amenities that improve quality of life for all while expanding opportunity throughout all of Reston.” The principles “seek to continue Reston’s long-standing commitment to removing barriers that perpetuate injustice” and include a broad array of goals ranging from involving all people in decision-making about future development, ensuring a mix of housing types and a multi-modal transportation system, prioritizing health and access to health care, distributing community amenities across Reston, and ensuring access for all residents; as well as principles related to expanded access to childcare and economic development.

Policy Alignment

The Countywide Strategic Plan provides direction for Fairfax County to fulfill its commitment to equitable development by operationalizing the One Fairfax Policy through a framework of Communities of Opportunity, which is presented in the Strategic Plan as follows:

“As the Countywide Strategic Plan is implemented, we are focused on transforming areas where residents face economic, educational, health, housing, and other challenges to accessing opportunity more broadly by:

Understanding Opportunity and Vulnerability

Using data and analytical tools to better understand the dynamics of opportunity and vulnerability within Fairfax County.

Targeting Interventions to Build Opportunity

Facilitating the development of targeted, strategic interventions in low-opportunity areas to building and reinforcing critical support structures for residents and businesses.

Targeting Interventions to Connect to Opportunity

Intentionally connecting low-income and other marginalized residents and families to existing opportunities.

Encouraging the Development of an Inclusive Economy

Building on Fairfax County’s strong economy while expanding opportunity for more broadly shared prosperity, especially for those facing the greatest barriers to advancing their well-being.”

Examples of Strategic Plan outcome areas and strategies that prioritize access to opportunity include:

- **Cultural and Recreational Opportunities**

CRO 4. Ensure land development practices integrate the needs of the community to achieve the equitable (and culturally and racially sensitive) development of cultural and recreation facilities, areas and venues.

- **Economic Opportunity**

EO 6. Use data, disaggregated by population and place, to promote and encourage land development so that investment in communities connects people to opportunity and mitigates residential and commercial displacement.

EO 13. Focus land development efforts on creating vibrant, transit-connected, walkable mixed-use destinations throughout the county that meet the needs of residents, employers and the workforce.

- **Effective and Efficient Government**

EEG 4. Improve public participation and engagement opportunities to ensure all facets of the community are represented and have the physical, technological, and language access necessary to engage and participate in community discussions and decisions.

- **Empowerment and Support for Residents Facing Vulnerability**

ESRFV 3. Identify root causes of vulnerabilities affecting residents and use those insights to inform policy and practice and target interventions to prevent vulnerability.

- **Healthy Communities**

HC 1. Integrate considerations of health, well-being and equity into the development, implementation and evaluation of land use, transportation and housing policies and ordinances.

- **Housing and Neighborhood Livability**

HNL 3. Identify and execute creative opportunities to develop affordable housing throughout the county and especially in revitalization areas, including flexible criteria for accessory dwelling units, building reuse, and repurposing and establishing community land trusts in communities that feature mobility options and walkable neighborhood amenities.

HNL 7. Expand innovative land development solutions, such as by-right accessory dwelling units, home sharing, co-housing and smaller lot sizes, while incentivizing first floor or entry floor living, universal design and energy efficiency.

HNL 12. Protect current residents from displacement where neighborhoods are changing rapidly by addressing impacts such as higher housing costs and higher costs of living.

HNL 19. Identify areas of the county with the greatest presence of community amenities, including transit, retail, recreation, arts and human services providers, and then revise zoning and other policies to allow for an increase in the number of housing units affordable to low and moderate income and senior households in those areas.

- **Mobility and Transportation**

MT13. Prioritize safe, healthy, accessible transportation options for all with a focus on equitable access for residents facing economic, health, housing and other challenges.

Trends In Planning For Equitable Development

Many national organizations such as the American Planning Association (APA), Smart Growth America, the Government Alliance for Race and Equity (GARE), the Urban Land Institute, and the Urban Institute have published frameworks or guides for equitable development. While the scope of equitable development can be broad, ranging from housing or health to anti-displacement and economic development strategies, generally equitable development frameworks and plans center on a series of priorities tailored to each community.

At the local level, examples of equitable development principles have been incorporated into various comprehensive planning efforts and can be referenced as models for planning in Fairfax County.

Charlotte, North Carolina

The [*Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan*](#) was adopted in 2021 and emphasizes increasing access to resources and amenities while minimizing displacement and fostering inclusive growth. The plan includes an Equitable Growth Framework, Implementation Strategy, and Metrics to track progress.

1. **Equity Growth Framework:** The Equity Growth Framework helps “to ensure that the costs and benefits of growth and change in Charlotte are distributed more equitably”. It uses the Equity Atlas, a tool that helps to identify disparities in “Access to Opportunity.” defined as access to services, housing, and infrastructure across Charlotte. It also identifies areas vulnerable to displacement. It uses data to pinpoint areas that require focused investment and supports policies to improve upward economic mobility.
2. **Increased Housing Diversity:** The Plan encourages the inclusion of duplexes, triplexes, and other multifamily units in traditionally single-family neighborhoods. This aims to provide more affordable housing options and enable residents to "age in place" without leaving their communities.
3. **Anti-Displacement Measures:** The Plan integrates tools to mitigate the pressure on lower-income residents and small businesses caused by urban growth. These efforts

include leveraging area-specific playbooks and policy maps that guide equitable land-use decisions.

4. **Transportation and Mobility:** A companion *Strategic Mobility Plan* aligns with the 2040 framework to enhance equitable access to transportation networks, aiming to improve connectivity across underserved areas.

Charlottesville, VA

The [Cville Plans Together](#) initiative in Charlottesville, Virginia, has integrated equitable development into its Comprehensive Plan. This initiative emphasizes housing affordability, environmental equity, and inclusive economic growth, driven by robust community engagement. Although there are many examples of equitable development principles incorporated into this plan, a few key highlights of equitable development principles include:

1. **Guiding Principle:** “Equity & Opportunity” established as an overarching Guiding Principle for the plan.
2. **New Land Use Category:** The development of a new land use category “General Residential” (Sensitive Community Areas) to allow for additional housing choice and tools to mitigate displacement within existing residential neighborhoods that have high proportions of populations that may be sensitive to displacement pressures.
3. **Community Engagement:** A dedicated chapter to Community Engagement outlines approaches to enhance public understanding of city processes, make planning more inclusive, and implement metrics for equitable outreach. This sets a precedent for transparent and participatory governance.

The implementation chapter focuses on practical steps to realize the plan’s vision. By ensuring accountability and strategic action, Charlottesville is embedding equity at the core of its urban development efforts.

Montgomery County, MD

Montgomery County recently adopted its general plan [Thrive Montgomery 2050](#) that includes several equitable development policies focused on addressing historic inequities and promoting inclusive growth. Key initiatives include:

1. **Equity in Housing and Zoning:** The plan emphasizes rezoning to allow for diverse housing types, including "missing middle" housing like duplexes and townhomes, particularly near transit hubs. This aims to address the housing shortage and increase affordability while reducing reliance on single-family zoning, which has historically limited access to resources for many communities.
2. **Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD):** Thrive Montgomery promotes the creation of complete, walkable communities around transit hubs. By clustering amenities such as grocery stores, schools, parks, and transit within 15-minute neighborhoods, the county seeks to improve accessibility for all residents, particularly

those without cars. These initiatives also aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and traffic congestion.

3. **Engagement and Racial Equity Frameworks:** The county has integrated equity-focused practices into all planning processes. This includes developing master plans that consider historical inequities, conducting data-driven equity analyses, and engaging underrepresented communities through multilingual and accessible outreach strategies. Additionally, the Racial Equity and Social Justice Act requires racial equity impact assessments for new zoning and legislative proposals.

Policy Recommendations

Fairfax County continues to face inequity that affect residents' access to opportunity. Given the Board direction to consider equity in the Comprehensive Plan Policy Plan and supported with guidance from national and regional organizations and examples from other jurisdictions, staff proposed the following recommendations to advance equitable development in Fairfax County:

1. Include an overarching Equitable Development Policy Plan principle to guide development of targeted policies in the individual elements of the Policy Plan that reflect equitable development strategies as outlined in the County's Strategic Plan and are informed by data and analytical tools to ensure access to opportunity, especially for low opportunity communities.
2. Strengthen the Policy Plan commitment to Inclusive Community Engagement to ensure all voices, including historically underrepresented communities, are welcome in the county's planning and decision-making processes.
3. Create Policy Plan objectives in all Policy Plan elements that recommend use of appropriate equitable development tools (ex., cultural planning area or zoning designation, community land trust, etc.) to support the Strategic Plan Communities of Opportunity framework.
4. Include objectives in the Land Use Element based on the Strategic Plan strategies related to displacement: "EO 6. Use data, disaggregated by population and place, to promote and encourage land development so that investment in communities connects people to opportunity and mitigates residential and commercial displacement" and "HNL 12. Protect current residents from displacement where neighborhoods are changing rapidly by addressing impacts such as higher housing costs and higher costs of living."
5. Conduct a study of commercial and residential displacement in Fairfax County to review the existing supportive framework and identify policy and program gaps that further displacement risk, especially in neighborhoods that are changing rapidly. Evaluate the feasibility and policy trade-off of tools to help mitigate displacement.

REFERENCES

[APA Planning for Equity Policy Guide \(planning.org\)](https://planning.org)
[Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan \(citfuture2040plan.com\)](https://citfuture2040plan.com)
[Communities of Opportunity Dashboard \(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](https://fairfaxcounty.gov)
[Countywide Strategic Plan \(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](https://fairfaxcounty.gov)
[Deeply Rooted History’s Lessons for Equity in Northern Virginia \(historyfortomorrow.org\)](https://historyfortomorrow.org)
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[Fairfax County Chairman’s Task Force on Race and Equity\(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](https://fairfaxcounty.gov)
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[Reston Comprehensive Plan \(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](https://fairfaxcounty.gov)
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