

# **Summary Report of the Regional Equity Atlas Forums**

## **The Regional Equity Atlas**

For many of us, the Portland-Vancouver region is a wonderful place to live and work.

We enjoy safe and efficient public transportation, good schools, and beautiful parks and green spaces. But to what extent do all of our communities have access to these

important resources and amenities? If inequities exist, how can we grow in a way that will increase equitable access for all? For the first time ever, we can see just how

equitable conditions are, or are not, across the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan region.

The Regional Equity Atlas brings the equity picture into focus.

The Atlas is the result of several years of work by the Coalition for a Livable Future and Portland State University's Population Research Center and Institute for Portland

Metropolitan Studies. It uses over fifty maps and a unique analytical approach to visually represent the geographic distribution of people and community assets and the relationship

between the two. It paints an intriguing picture of our region.

## **Forums Bring the Atlas into the Community Conversation**

The Atlas was unveiled in a series of forums that brought together policy makers and leaders from community based organizations, government agencies, K-12 and higher education, and the private sector. The forums were organized to raise awareness about the Atlas, stimulate dialogue about the current state of equity in our region, and lay the foundation for a Regional Equity Action Plan. Held between January and March 2007, the forums focused on the connections between the Atlas' major topics. The Forums focused on the following topics:

- Forum 1: The relationships between housing and transportation.
- Forum 2: The connection between housing and quality schools.
- Forum 3: An examination how the design of a community impacts the health of the people who live there.

At each of the forums, a panel of local experts led the participants in a discussion of two key questions:

1. Are you surprised by what you see in the Atlas or does it confirm what you know about our community?
2. What strategies will help us create a more equitable region?

The Atlas held few surprises for the panelists and participants. Instead the conversations expanded on the Atlas' findings. For example, while the Atlas illustrates the concentration of upper income households, one discussion revealed that wealth is concentrated even more heavily than income. Superintendents from the David Douglas

and North Clackamas School Districts reinforced the demographic changes identified in the Atlas. Some participants mentioned several ways in which the Atlas could be or was being used to further equity objectives. For example the Atlas is helping Portland Parks and Recreation understand disparities in access to parks and active spaces. Others suggested ways that the Atlas could be expanded to include additional questions or data.

## **Key Themes**

The forums produced a wealth of information and recommended strategies that will be of interest to anyone who is working to build a more equitable and sustainable region.

Five main themes emerged: inclusion, collaboration, planning, education, and policy and funding. These themes serve as keys for developing a Regional Equity Action Plan.

### **Inclusion**

Panelists and participants at each of the forums identified the need to engage a more diverse range of voices. People who live every day with the realities described in the Atlas need to be brought into the conversation. It was noted for example, that those who were most negatively impacted by changes in the housing market were absent from the discussion about the connections between housing, schools, and transportation. The call for more community involvement was perhaps strongest in the discussion about education. One of the characteristics of quality schools is a high level of engagement by parents and other stakeholders. Yet too often, parents do not know how their school functions and are unaware of what their children are supposed to be learning. Whether developing strategies for more accessible transportation, schools, or parks and green

space, it will be critical that the end users are included, especially communities that, for whatever reason, are often neglected.

## **Planning**

The Regional Equity Atlas highlights connections. An example is the way in which community design impacts human health. The importance of taking a holistic approach to planning was one of the key themes to emerge from the forums. This conversation often took the form of questions. For example:

- How are major initiatives such as the Big Look, New Look, and the Columbia River Crossing Task Force connected?
- What does the creation of parks and sidewalks mean for property values? Do those amenities contribute to gentrification?
- How do our economic development strategies consider impacts on transportation and the need for active spaces?
- How can market mechanisms promote the common good?

One recommendation was to conduct a *health impact assessment* whenever new developments or initiatives are being planned.

## **Collaboration**

A holistic approach to planning requires collaboration between and among community based organizations and governmental agencies. Transit and school planning should be done in concert with affordable housing. One example of that kind of collaboration is the discussion between TriMet and the Community Land Trust to provide affordable

housing near the North/South TriMet line. In Vancouver, city government has been working with the Vancouver Housing Authority to include mixed use developments as part of the revitalization of the downtown core. The bi-state trails initiative was cited as an excellent opportunity for the public health community to collaborate with Metro and other agencies toward an objective that would serve common interests.

### **Policy and Funding**

Many of the forum conversations focused on policies that could contribute to a more equitable region. For example, the desirability of rent control or housing price caps was debated. Policies that would provide incentives for locating new developments near public transit or closer to the urban core, or help workers find housing near their jobs were discussed. A conversation about the problems associated with student mobility led to education policy recommendations that included the establishment of a core curriculum and a mechanism that would allow funding to follow students that move to different schools. The importance of adequate funding, especially for schools and transportation systems was also frequently mentioned.

### **Education**

Last, but not least, the importance of education, in its broadest sense, was highlighted. One suggestion was to improve, if not reinvent, the way we teach middle and high school students to better prepare them to succeed in a rapidly changing world. However, the need for more education was not limited to youth. For example, the housing and transportation forum featured a lively discussion about the need to teach home buyers to

consider transportation costs in conjunction with housing costs. Likewise, more could be done to educate people about the costs of renting versus purchasing a home. There is also a need to educate public officials and business and community leaders about the issues illustrated by the Atlas.

The themes described above provide a general summary of the rich conversations that took place at the forums. A review of the raw data will provide more specific suggestions as well as additional questions and issues that need to be addressed. The forums represent the first step to making essential resources and amenities available to all members of our community. As we move forward we will create a more equitable and sustainable region.