

# Paving Equity Into the Streets of Oakland

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For much of the country, the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor during a health and economic crisis disproportionately impacting Black, Indigenous, and people of color began a reckoning with long-standing, structural racial inequity in public life and the need for policymakers and government to proactively work to eliminate them. At the City of Oakland and the Oakland Department of Transportation — or OakDOT, as we call it —, we have been centering racial inequity through a structured and strategic approach. We hope to become a model for our profession and cities everywhere.

In the center of the San Francisco Bay Area, Oakland is also at the center of an inequality and housing crisis. White Oaklanders have a life expectancy of more than 81 years; for their Black neighbors, it's less than 73 years. This disparity is the legacy of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, the war on drugs, mass incarceration, unequal public schooling, and biased and unaccountable policing. It was not just these legacies that contributed to systemically unequal outcomes. Our professions of city-building and transportation, unfortunately, also played significant roles — through redlining, suburbanization, urban disinvestment, transit abandonment, liberal use of eminent domain to make way for freeways and urban renewal in Black and brown neighborhoods. East of the San

Francisco Bay, the regional Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system was built underground in wealthier Berkeley but above ground in North, West and East Oakland, where communities of color were concentrated.

Recently, the Bay Area's failure to build enough housing during a technology-fueled economic boom created an affordability and homelessness crisis disproportionately impacting Oakland and its communities of color. The rent for an average one-bedroom apartment is 29% higher than it was five years ago and home prices have increased by 52% during the same period. The number of homeless people in Oakland jumped 47% in the past two years and about three-quarters of the city's unhoused population are African Americans. This has contributed to a dramatic change in Oakland's demographics.

In 1980, nearly half of Oaklanders were Black. Today this share is closer to one-quarter. For a city that has produced iconic Black athletes and entertainers, bringing African American identity from the margins into the mainstream, this causes anguish. Oakland is rich in racial activism, pride, and progressiveness; a place where movements are made, or find their true voice. The Black Panther Political Party was founded in Oakland, and the Black Lives Matter movement took root here. Oakland is not accepting recent changes and growing disparities without working to combat them.

## Creating a Department with Equity in its DNA

It was in this context that OakDOT was launched in 2017. The core premise of the reorganization

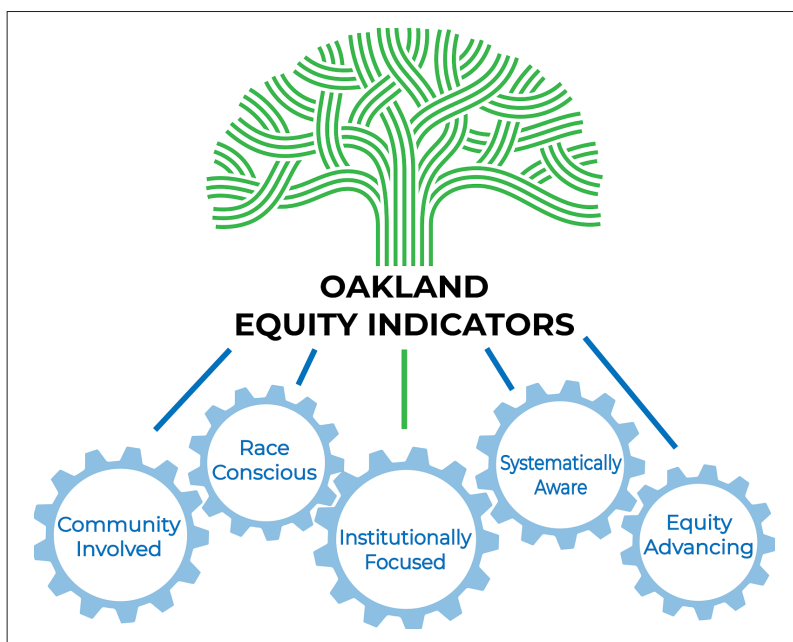
that created OakDOT was that managing streets is about more than maintenance, and that transportation is about more than getting vehicles from point A to point B. We recognized the opportunity to help Oaklanders thrive, save them time and money, improve their access to schools and services, grow their economy, strengthen bonds in their community, and keep them safe. As a new department, OakDOT developed its own DNA through an ambitious Strategic Plan that outlined 37 goals being pursued via 98 strategies. At its core are four foundational values: equity, safety, sustainability and trust. However, equity is elevated at OakDOT as not just one of four key values and aspirations, but additionally as a lens through which the other values and aspirations are pursued.

While OakDOT has large aspirations, residents are frustrated that the City has not provided a basic state of good repair and a dignified public realm: long-standing neglect of streets and sidewalks due to a stagnant gas tax and structural local government financial constraints has meant that cracked sidewalks and potholes are the norm. Grandmothers who have lived on the same block their whole lives have never seen their street repaved. OakDOT is changing this thanks to a voter-approved, innovative, and comprehensive local infrastructure bond. Measure KK, approved in 2016, provides

\$350 million dollars for street and sidewalk improvements along with \$150 million for public facilities like parks and libraries and \$100 million for affordable housing. Importantly, voters and the Oakland City Council directed that equity be a driving consideration to how city departments allocate these new resources.

## A Professional, Systematic Approach to Equity

Oakland is the first city in California to have a Department of Race and Equity, created at roughly the same time as OakDOT. Its mission is to create a city in which diversity has been maintained, racial disparities have been eliminated and racial equity has been achieved. It is training staff in departments throughout the city using proven strategies, including increasing awareness of root causes, cultivating and mobilizing advocates, establishing baseline disparity data, collaborating with communities, and adopting a results-based accountability approach. The work includes OakDOT forming a Racial Equity Team that developed a charter being used to operationalize equity, measure progress, and list specific responsibilities for management and staff. In 2018, the city published the “Oakland Equity Indicators Report” to provide a baseline quantitative framework to better understand the impacts of race, measure inequities, and enable us to monitor



**Figure 1.** The City of Oakland is using data and an integrated approach to pursuing equity

progress and setbacks. OakDOT is working to reduce inequities by looking at hiring practices, community engagement and planning, cultural expression, and traffic safety.

An OakDOT Racial Equity Team subcommittee is looking closely at how the department is being built. We recognize the need for OakDOT to reflect the diversity of the communities we serve. Hiring rules and typical recruitment practices, governed by civil service and education requirements, can be an impediment to bringing people of color into positions of authority. We have been examining every step of the recruitment process in an effort to expand the range of candidates because a team that reflects the community that we serve will strengthen our capacity to administer equitable services. OakDOT has incorporated an examination of candidates' understanding of structural inequities, along with the value of their lived experience, into its recruitment process. While we have much further to go, this approach is helping OakDOT better reflect the communities we serve and become a team with the capacity and values to address inequity in our daily work.

Fundamental to pursuing equity and working equitably is a new approach to community engagement. OakDOT is meeting communities where they are and focusing on engaging those who have not been heard because of structural challenges to participating in governance. For example, OakDOT is attending existing community events rather than hosting evening public input sessions, it arranges for child care and provides food at community meetings and strategically targets reaching populations that are less likely to participate. To update the bike plan our entire team — including consultants — took racial equity training. We then developed an equity framework, looking through a racial equity lens at existing conditions, project identification, and investment prioritization.

Groups with deep ties to communities of color in Oakland became part of the bike plan project team, each receiving stipends for their time and insights. The team did not shy away from the key issues Oakland is facing to instead talk narrowly about barriers to cycling: We

honored Oaklanders' concerns about housing security, displacement, and gentrification; and empowered our community partners to help identify policies, programs, and projects that can deliver mobility resources to communities most impacted by these concerns. The plan, which was approved unanimously by Oakland's Planning Commission and City Council in the summer of 2020, includes innovative proposals like bike repair stations and mechanics at libraries in neighborhoods that lack bike shops. In addition, OakDOT committed to work interdepartmentally to address concerns around housing, development and community policing. Their inclusion and the unanimous adoption of the plan demonstrate the value of genuine community engagement.

Historically disadvantaged communities in Oakland told us that saving time and money in a booming economy with scarce affordable housing was a top priority. One-quarter of African American households do not own a car — about two-and-a-half times the citywide average. That is why we supported emerging mobility like free-floating carshare, bikeshare and shared electric scooters and mopeds. Many Oaklanders now find they need not spend up to \$9,000 a year to own a personal vehicle thanks to these services. OakDOT has championed low-income programs and equitable coverage policies to make sure those that most in need are not left out.

OakDOT's Paint the Town! program enhances community members' sense of belonging to their neighborhood. The program gives communities the opportunity to design murals and paint them on the street. It was designed to be as simple as possible and to reduce barriers to entry. Funding from foundations was raised to support high-need communities, and we have approved murals in twice as many communities of concern — areas where disadvantaged populations like severely rent-burdened households, low-income populations, and people of color are concentrated — than in areas that have more resources.

Government's most important responsibility is keeping its communities, especially its most vulnerable members, safe. Unfortunately,

traffic-related severe injuries and fatalities occur most frequently in historically redlined, lower-income neighborhoods where higher proportions of people of color live. We are responding urgently and rapidly to terrible tragedies that happen on streets, to make swift meaningful change where the most horrific injuries occur. At the same time, we are working to innovate with designs and processes that encourage safe choices. For example, in response to a fatal collision in October 2019, OakDOT installed the West Coast's first "Hardened Centerline" — a treatment that puts a rubber speed bump along the centerline of the road projecting into an intersection to slow left-turning vehicles. Data drive actions that prevent future tragedies. The complaint-based systems local governments use can exacerbate structural inequities. In Oakland, neighborhoods having fewer injuries from traffic crashes ask more frequently for traffic safety improvements. To counter this, we developed a model that prioritizes traffic safety requests from places with more injuries, by equally weighting location within a community of concern, the collision history of the street, and proximity to schools.

## Budgeting & Paving Equitably

A government's budget is the ultimate expression of its values. Unfortunately, many communities speak about values like equity, but when the time comes to budget they fall back on whatever receives the most vocal advocacy.

Oakland updated its process for developing its Capital Improvement Program budget to reflect community values by turning them into a scorecard. OakDOT uses the scorecard to objectively compare and to ensure that investments track to our values.

One notable result of the new approach to capital budgeting is our Three Year Paving plan, adopted last year, the first paving plan in the country to explicitly use equity metrics to direct road repaving resources. Streets in every Oakland neighborhood need repaving. With new funding available, we had to determine which streets in which areas to repave first.

Community members in virtually every neighborhood maintain that their neighborhood streets are the worst in the City. Using objective data sets the record straight. To develop an equity-based paving plan, we analyzed demographic and road condition data for nine separate areas of Oakland. We presented the population, income, and racial and ethnic composition of each area along with the total street mileage including miles in need of repaving and the average condition of streets in that area.

A street in disrepair is unpleasant, bends rims, and breaks vehicle axles, leading to traffic disruptions and personal costs. Equity was a top consideration because the cost of a damaged vehicle, for a household paying 50%

**Figure 2.** Streets in East Oakland that have not been paved in generations are being resurfaced as part of the equity-driven three-year plan



or more of its income in rent, is high: it can mean losing a job, missing a rent payment, and possibly eviction and homelessness. An affluent household, in contrast, is still inconvenienced by a damaged vehicle, but may have access to additional vehicles, is likely engaged in white-collar employment where lateness won't cause job loss, and is not in a situation where the family will miss a mortgage payment if they have to pay for vehicle repair.

Our analysis allowed the public to have a common baseline of existing conditions; its conclusions were surprising to many. For example, few residents and policymakers knew that the North Oakland Hills, a community that wields great political influence, only has about 24,000 residents (6% of the entire city), 69% of whom are white, with a median household income of \$158,000. Because the area is by low density, we maintain 110 miles of streets (13% of the city's total) where there are only 379 people per mile of street in need of repaving. By comparison, East Oakland, where the most redlined areas were located, is home to 99,000 residents (24% of the city) of whom 93% are people of color living in households with a median income of \$43,000. A much higher density area, it has 165 miles of streets (20% of total) and 1,400 residents for every mile of street in need of repaving.

These data make clear that East Oakland warrants more paving investment. This contrasts with the long-standing perception that the North Oakland Hills had the worst streets and was most deserving of investment that clearly resulted from those community members' vigorous engagement in discussions of the issue of road conditions.

The data were used to craft a funding proposal. The proposal showed two simple metrics by area of the city — the share of local streets in need of repaving, and the share of underserved population. We weighed those equally, averaging the two metrics to create the proposed share of local street paving resources for that area. East Oakland is home to 29% of the population with disadvantages and 18% of the local streets in poor or failing condition. So the plan proposed to direct 24% of the

paving resources (the average of 18 and 29) to East Oakland. By contrast, the North Oakland Hills has 16% of the road mileage in need of repaving and just 2% of the population with disadvantages; therefore, the plan proposed that 9% of local street paving dollars be spent in that area.

It was important that Oaklanders understood our proposed approach prior to bringing it to the City Council for consideration. Meetings were held throughout the city at which OakDOT explained the proposal. Unsurprisingly, explaining the proposal to residents of the North Oakland Hills proved challenging. Headlines in the *San Francisco Chronicle* exclaimed "Oakland hills residents break an axle over city's \$100 million pothole plan" (internet) and "Bumpy rollout of plan to fix Oakland's streets." Despite the headlines, however, many community members understood and ultimately supported the rationale.

A deeper examination of the plan ultimately led to enough citywide support for it to pass the Oakland City Council unanimously, and this in turn led to more positive headlines in the *Chronicle*: "Oakland pothole plan paves path to equity for lower-income areas." Innovation in planning and budgeting has attracted national attention. The public radio program "Marketplace" featured the plan in a segment titled: "One way Oakland is fighting racial inequality? By fixing potholes." Now, crews are in the field in areas like East Oakland repaving local streets, and grandmothers who've been there for 80 years or more are saying thank you.

## **Paving the Way for a National Movement Towards Equity**

OakDOT's approach to equity has helped it serve the communities hit most significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic. Just a few weeks into shelter-in-place orders, OakDOT initiated the Oakland Slow Streets program, which for significant street segments invited non-motorized street users off of the sidewalks and into the roadbed while restricting motor vehicle traffic to only local trips. The purpose was to provide the road area for non-motorized users to safely move and maintain physical

distance. While popular in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods in Oakland, we quickly heard from partners in communities that have been victims of structural inequality, that the initiative was not meeting their needs. Specifically, many in these communities were not telecommuting and were essential workers still traveling to workplaces. A more pressing concern was traffic that was speeding near essential services and workplaces like grocery stores. Hearing this feedback, OakDOT made several adjustments to the program, including the development of Oakland Slow Streets: Essential Places, which installs rapid, low-cost pedestrian crossing improvements to locations in priority neighborhoods where people were still traveling to during shelter-in-place like grocery stores.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the movement for social justice in response to police killings of Black people have highlighted that government needs both a humble and intentional approach to truly begin to reverse long-standing structural inequities. We will realize equity when identity and location cannot predict outcomes. Unfortunately, almost every indicator of well-being shows troubling disparities by race and place. OakDOT is committed to achieving equity using a systematic and professional approach. Authentic community engagement and transparent, data-driven decision-making need wider adoption. Cities nationwide are learning from our approach — in turn, better serving their own communities. Combating racism and inequality may not seem related to potholes, but Oakland is showing that in a significant way, they absolutely intersect.

*This article is adapted from a presentation given by the author during the 2019 UCLA Lake Arrowhead Symposium.*

## About the Author

Ryan Russo is director of the Oakland Department of Transportation.

## Further Reading

[Oakland Equity Indicators](#)

[Toole Design Group's Equity Resource Guide](#), by Tamika Butler, Esq.

[Oakland Department of Transportation Strategic Plan & Updates](#)

[How Oakland Got Real About Equitable Urban Planning](#)