



Olympia Strong Equity Analysis

The scope for Olympia Strong was established under the umbrella of Olympia's commitment to advancing a community that is just and equitable for all. At the onset, we knew not all Olympians have equal access to resources that help meet basic needs or opportunities to improve their quality of life, and that discriminatory barriers persist in our community. Thus, the planning process and resulting strategies aimed to reduce economic barriers and expand opportunities for all community members, with emphasis on Black, Indigenous, people of color, LGBTQ+, disabled and low-income communities.

The first step was to ensure that these communities were engaged in the process so that their needs and ideas would be reflected in the proposals. DEI consultant Parfait Bassale was engaged to advise on the process. Person on the street interviews were conducted in places frequented by community members representing a wide demographic, such as the library and grocery stores. Community interviews included several cultural organizations, and staff set up a booth on seven Saturdays to connect with people about Olympia Strong at the multi-cultural ASHHO community center. Additionally, listening sessions were designed to hear specifically from low-income parents, people with disabilities, renters, BIPOC business and student groups, and formally justice-involved adults in re-entry.

Education and Workforce Pathways

The set of actions in this focus area will benefit residents as well as employers. Adult residents will benefit from career training and continuing education programs. Youth residents will benefit from having a seat at the City leadership table, and from education and career pathway programs that provide mentorship and develop a sense of belonging. The actions will also benefit employers/businesses by increasing the number of educated and skilled workers.

Data shows certain groups face higher barriers to access education and workforce pathways that can increase household financial security. These groups include people who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, people of color, those with disabilities and people who are LGBTQ+. The barriers are rooted in and exacerbated by continuing systemic and discrimination and racism. Examples include food and housing insecurity, lower household incomes leading to a lack of funds for higher education or childcare, generational poverty and lack of access to health care.

The proposed set of actions intends to alleviate existing disparities by providing more cultivated pathways to education and workforce opportunities that meet people where they are at. These programs specifically target burdened populations by providing pathways to programs involving best practice elements such as wrap-around services to sustain participation in programs, navigators, mentors, and cohort models that increase representation and belonging.

Organizations such as SPSCC, PacMtn and Morningside will also benefit from proposed partnerships that enhance their equity and inclusion initiatives. Community organizations like

the Food Bank and United Way stand to benefit from programs that can lead to increased household security for individuals by reducing the growing burden to provide services that assist struggling households. The entire community benefits when we advance goals to build a strong and inclusive regional economy.

Residents and employers/businesses may be burdened if taxes are raised to fund these initiatives.

Housing and Sense of Security

More affordable housing was identified as the number one economic goal for the community through Olympia Strong. The proposed actions are intended to increase access to affordable (including income restricted housing) and homeownership options, along with other actions to increase household financial security.

The high cost of housing in Thurston County along with income disparities contribute limited housing options and higher risk of displacement for many, with marginalized populations disproportionately affected. Data shows that people of color, people with disabilities, and people who are transgender are:

- Housing cost-burdened at higher rates,
- More likely to be renters,
- Are at higher risk of displacement, and
- More likely to experience homelessness in Thurston County.

The county is especially lacking accessible and affordable units to meet needs of residents with disabilities.

In response, a suite of proposed actions would have the City expand its role in facilitating the building of housing affordable to low and moderate income households. Activities include expanding use of city-owned land for housing projects through land banking, a loan program and a proactive focus on building partnerships with low-income housing developers. These partnerships would include home ownership options and projects that meet the specific needs of various populations (e.g., people with disabilities, seniors, justice-involved individuals). In addition to facilitating affordable housing for low income people there is also an emphasis on housing for moderate income households - those who are not being served by existing permanent supportive housing investments because they are not among the most vulnerable community members experiencing homelessness, but also not able to afford or access market rate housing options.

As housing costs rise and available land and market factors favor development of multifamily over single family options, opportunities for homeownership are declining in Olympia. Increasing homeownership options is especially important, as this provides one of the best avenues for households to build wealth. The City is completing a study in 2023 to identify homeownership options, and the resulting programs should further expound on how

marginalized populations can access these opportunities. We know that about 44% of people of color are renters compared to 32% of white residents in Thurston County, and Black/African American have among the lowest rates of homeownership in Thurston County.

These actions will also benefit businesses who need to their workers to be able to access affordable workforce housing.

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Business Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Support

Many of the proposed actions are intended to benefit residents and alleviate existing disparities by working with partners to support and elevate a range of business enterprise opportunities that fit the needs of various resident populations.

Certain groups face higher barriers to access pathways into business ownership than others. One of the biggest barriers to starting or growing a business is access to capital. National data shows us that people who are Black, Brown, Indigenous and people of color have less access to bank loans due to historic discrimination that has limited their generational and household wealth potential and credit scores. In our engagement we also heard that people who are of low income or disabled face barriers to business training programs. These barriers include lack of access to affordable childcare, inaccessible hours due to work schedules, lack of transportation, and environments that are unwelcoming because participants don't feel like their life circumstances are seen or understood. Many of the proposed actions are intended to address these inequities.

The key is to provide pathways that enable marginalized populations to actually access the programs offered in the community. Many of our community partners are already taking action to advance such pathways, and Olympia's involvement and support can ensure these effectively reach Olympia residents. For example, we are proposing to continue our partnership and support for business support programs through the EDC. The EDC offers a range of services through their Women and Minority Business Center, PTAC program that aims to help minority and women owned businesses access federal contracts, and they recently stood up a BIPOC business liaison and task force to help guide efforts moving forward. Another partner, Enterprise for Equity (E4E), offers business plan training for low-income people that is specifically tailored to create a sense of belonging reduce barriers.

While we have derived enough information to give us a starting point for understanding the types of pathways needed, the work to engage with affected populations to build these programs will need to continue as part of implementation.

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Community Pride, Lovability and Resiliency

Actions in this focus area direct Olympia to continually invest in and facilitate projects and partnerships that make Olympia a desirable destination to work, live and play, while also ensuring we are prepared to respond effectively to physical and financial challenges. The proposed actions encompass a broad range of activities, having to do with arts and culture, creating places and spaces, youth recreation, community pride, tourism and effective disaster response. All community members can benefit from these actions. Residents benefit from projects that increase quality of life, businesses benefit from public investment that draws further private investment and tourism, and the City organization benefits from the stable and growing tax revenue derived from continued community investment.

We heard concern that youth and other community members with low incomes are often denied access to arts, culture, recreation and other programming due to costs. We've also heard during public engagement for many different planning processes that youth opportunities for civic engagement are lacking and that youth need more age-appropriate community spaces. As proposed actions are implemented, care should be taken to ensure opportunities exist for those with lower incomes.

Some of the listed initiatives are already underway, where there are examples of how we can reduce or eliminate disparities. For example, with regard to arts, culture and heritage both the planning for the Armory and Cultural Access include consideration of how lower income households and youth will be able to easily access the programs. This effort should continue.

In addition, Olympia Strong notes that the City should consider making public investments into areas outside of downtown, such as on the westside. This is recognizing that certain areas of the city (the westside, downtown and parts of the northeast and east Olympia) have higher instances of poverty, low income and disability compared to other areas (the southeast, the upper westside and the UGA.) Over the past few decades, the City has made significant investments into public amenities in the downtown area (Hands on Children's Museum, Percival Landing, Washington Center, City Hall, etc.) However, the City has not made significant public investments into community spaces on the westside where there is the highest concentration of children accessing free and reduced lunches within the school district.

Residents and businesses may be burdened if taxes are raised to fund these initiatives.