



# Public Engagement in U.S. Sustainability Plans: An Overview of Recent Practices

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# Overview

This report is a summary of public engagement practices used in selected sustainability and comprehensive plans in the United States. The purpose of this report is to provide the City of Detroit's Office of Sustainability with a range of options as it embarks on its own sustainability plan. While not exhaustive, this report highlights a range of techniques that vary in approach and innovation.

The summaries and takeaways on the pages that follow represent the information that is available in the text of each plan as well as any readily available supporting documentation. For further information, we suggest following up with these cities' sustainability departments (or equivalent administering body) for interviews or additional notes or policy literature.

The following cities and sustainability plans are represented in this report:

- Austin, TX, *Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan* (adopted 2012, amended 2016)
- Boston, MA, *Imagine Boston 2030* (draft plan to be adopted 2017)
- Baltimore, MD, *The Baltimore Sustainability Plan* (adopted 2009, to be revised 2017) and *Disaster Preparedness and Planning Project*
- Cambridge, MA, *Envision Cambridge* (ongoing public engagement process, 2017)
- Charleston, SC, *Charleston Green Plan Roadmap to Sustainability* (adopted 2010)
- Grand Rapids, MI, *Green Grand Rapids* (master plan update, adopted 2012)
- Milwaukee, WI, *ReFresh Milwaukee* (published 2013)
- New York City, NY, *One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City* (published 2015)
- St. Louis, MO, *Sustainability Plan* (adopted 2013)
- Washington, DC, *Sustainability DC* (launched 2011)

Among the plans surveyed, four plans stand out. Boston and Cambridge (from the same general geographic area) serve as general exemplars for carrying out a comprehensive planning process with multiple innovative strategies while reaching a wide range of demographic groups. Austin's plan stands out for its iterative approach, basing future steps on the successes and failures of prior steps, including demographic reach. Finally, Baltimore may provide the greatest inspiration for Detroit. In a city with similar demographics, Baltimore's plan emphasized climate change adaption, disaster preparedness, and the importance of advancing the principles of social justice in every planning effort.

# Austin, TX

**Overview:** Austin's *Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan* is the product of the Citizens Advisory Task Force, made up of 38 members of the public appointed by the Austin City Council and Travis County Commissioners Court. The plan outlines six goals and opportunities that function as focus areas to continue developing the city sustainably: preserving livability, expanding transportation choices, tackling the ethnic divide, protecting natural resources, promoting prosperity for all, and collaborating regionally. The plan's overarching sustainability goals are divided into three categories: prosperity and jobs; conservation and the environment; and community health, equity, and cultural vitality.

**Demographics:** In terms of racial makeup, Austin has a notably higher white population than Detroit (75.0% to Detroit's 13.4%), as well as a higher overall median income (\$57,689 to Detroit's \$25,764). Due in large part to the city's location in the Southwest, more than one-third of residents identify themselves as Hispanic (34.5%). Austin has gained a reputation in recent decades as a liberal, progressive enclave within a highly conservative state, but like most American cities, it suffers from deep patterns of racial and class segregation. The city's poverty level (18.0%) is much lower than Detroit's (40.3%), but poverty rates are visibly higher for its black (26.6%) and Hispanic (27.9%) residents, concentrated in the city's impoverished east side.

## Engagement techniques

The development of Imagine Austin was shaped around two guiding principles: iterative public engagement (with each round building upon the previous round) and repeated check-ins with the Planning Commission and City Council. The demographics of participants were monitored throughout the process. As gaps were identified, additional outreach was developed to overcome them. The task force spread public awareness of Imagine Austin in six ways:

- City utility bills included Imagine Austin materials three times
- A Speakers Bureau presented to 136 gatherings and allowed community groups to host a presentation from City staff and provide comments
- Direct outreach to 751 churches, neighborhood associations, professional associations, and community organizations
- 240,000 surveys, newsletters, and fliers
- Staff and volunteers engaged passersby at events including farmers markets, football games, public meetings and forums, school events, fairs, and festivals
- Paid advertisements on radio, television, print, online, taxicabs, and banners.

**1) Public participation workshop:** The public's first opportunity to shape Imagine Austin was an August 2009 workshop. At this event, participants identified key communities that should be involved as

well as the steps necessary to engage them. The workshop developed six general principles: "open to all," "community engagement," "transparency," "enthusiastic and vibrant," "engaging the underrepresented," and "fun." People of color and people with less than a Bachelor's degree were found to be underrepresented. Two additional focus groups were held to test the principles with people in these groups.

**2) Community forums series:** The task force solicited public input through a five-step process: four Community Forums, consisting of multiple public meetings, surveys, and other tools, and a fifth step consisting of a lengthy working group process.

- **Series 1 (5,892 participants):** The first series consisted of six public meetings and an online and paper survey, focusing on three questions: "What are Austin's strengths? What are our challenges? How can the city be improved on its 200th anniversary, 2039?" The task force also distributed "Meetings in a Box" to allow residents to host their own small gatherings to brainstorm ideas about how Austin should grow and allocate its resources. The kits were pre-packaged with invitations, scripts, questions, and instructions for returning the results to the City.
- **Series 2 (4,211 participants):** The second series consisted of Meetings in a Box and a sec-



ond round of surveys of 1,100 residents, as well as Speak Week. Speak Week featured traveling teams that visited 42 events and 31 locations throughout the city. The City also held four public meetings and eight community-sponsored events featuring an interactive chip exercise. The interactive chip exercise asked participants to allocate chips to identify locations for future growth across the city and to represent different forms of development. The exercises produced a total of 64 maps.

- **Series 3 (4,761 participants):** Using the chip exercise maps, five alternate future scenarios were created, each illustrating a different way that Austin could grow. In the third series, members of the public reviewed and rated these scenarios based on a range of sustainability indicators at nine open house meetings, in community conversation kits, at traveling team booths, and by paper and online surveys. The series produced two documents: the Plan Framework, containing policy guidance, and the Preferred Scenario, showing the spatial patterns of growth that support the vision.
- **Series 4 (2,979 participants):** The last round of input was structured around review of the initial draft comprehensive plan, presented to Austin residents at a release party in October 2011, as well as 19 boards and Commissions.

- **Working Groups:** The task force held seven Building Block Working Groups to develop actions to implement the directions included in the Plan Framework. The groups met a total of 22 times throughout 2011 and took two surveys.

**3) Surveys:** Numerous online and paper surveys were distributed throughout the plan's development process, allowing Austinites to participate at their convenience. While most survey respondents completed surveys online, paper surveys were distributed through a number of mechanisms: at libraries and public events and, in some cases, inclusion in the Austin-American Statesman or Austin Chronicle.

**4) Online strategy:** Online forums allowed Austin residents to provide comments and for the community and staff to communicate in a less structured way. Imagine Austin also had a robust presence on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

**5) Panel discussions:** The task force and other organizations including Urban Land Institute, Envision Central Texas, League of Bicycling Voters, Livable City, American Institute of Architects, UT City Forums hosted various panel discussions throughout the two-year process.

**Summary:** On a strategy-by-strategy basis, Austin's community engagement approach is fairly conventional, consisting of a series of surveys, working groups, and public forums. However, Austin excels in planning process implementation: the plan did not follow a pre-programmed series of steps, but rather iterated on the successes of previous steps, course-correcting when necessary. This approach is particularly apparent in the City's series of community forums. Most importantly for Detroit, this iterative process entailed keeping a close eye on demographics, with the City identifying groups who were left out and needed to be included going forward to create an inclusive process.

# Baltimore, MD

**Overview:** The City of Baltimore adopted its current *Sustainability Plan* in 2009, and is currently working on draft language for a 2017 update. The 2009 plan defines sustainability as a “three-legged stool” of social equity (people), economic health (prosperity), and environmental stewardship (planet), with the goal of incorporating these three elements into the decision-making process to make Baltimore a “clean, healthy, efficient, green, mobile, aware, and invested community.” The plan opens with a section on public engagement, and moves into seven themes determined during working group sessions: cleanliness, pollution prevention, resource conservation, greening, transportation, education and awareness, and green economy.

Baltimore’s sustainability plan emphasizes public engagement. When reading the sustainability plan, it is important to remember that Baltimore also has a *Disaster Preparedness and Planning Project (DP3)* plan (following FEMA requirements), that combines hazard mitigation with climate change adaptation plans. Created in 2013, the DP3 aims to make Baltimore’s daily activities “reflect a commitment shared by government, business, and citizens to reduce or eliminate impacts from current and future natural hazards.” Baltimore undertook extensive public engagement in compiling the DP3, with a special emphasis on input from the city’s most vulnerable populations.

**Demographics:** Baltimore has many similarities to Detroit. As a former industrial city, it was hard hit by the decline in manufacturing in the second half of the 20th century. The city’s residents are majority black. The city’s population is highly segregated with two distinct sections. The “white L” incorporates long existing advantages while the “black butterfly” has structural disadvantages. In Baltimore, black (28.1%) and Hispanic (25.5%) poverty levels are roughly double that of white residents (13.6%). In Detroit, poverty levels are roughly equivalent at approximately 40% across racial lines.

## Engagement techniques

### Sustainability Plan

**1) Working groups:** As the core of the engagement process, the City’s Office of Sustainability (OoS) and Commission on Sustainability (CoS) assembled working groups centered around six resource areas: i) Energy/Air, ii) Water, iii) Green Infrastructure, iv) Built Environment, v) Transportation, and vi) Waste. Between June and August of 2008, the groups collectively convened 18 public meetings and dozens of working sessions, engaging an estimated 300 citizens.

**2) Community Conversations:** An ad hoc community advisory team of 20 citizens recruited more than 30 “Sustainability Ambassadors”. These Sustainability Ambassadors worked in pairs to attend more than 35 Community Conversations in September and October of 2008. As opposed to the pre-defined themes of the working groups, the intent of these Community Conversations was to allow residents to discuss sustainability outside of the “silos” of the official sustainability

agenda. The teams reached an estimated 550 people from across Baltimore, talking with many individuals not traditionally involved in environmental issues.

**3) Youth outreach:** The OoS and CoS assembled a Youth Advisory Group of 15-20 young people of diverse backgrounds from both public and private schools. The group planned a one-day event, Greenscape ’08, held in October 2008 for young people. The event incorporated art, music, education, and allowed attendees to express their ideas through different mediums: artwork, media production, graffiti walls, and a survey. While youth responses to sustainability issues did not differ significantly from those of adults, this youth effort helped foster recognition that young people can be directly involved in efforts to improve their environment.

### Disaster Preparedness and Planning Project

**1) Town hall meetings:** The DP3’s Advisory Committee held two Town Hall events in the Spring of

2013 to explain the planning process to the public and request feedback regarding the most important natural hazards affecting Baltimore.

To promote the meetings, the committee sent out more than 8,000 mailers, including 6,500 people who lived in floodplain areas, 800 mailers to the City's Community Association Directory, in addition to City employees and hazard mitigation mailing lists. The town hall meetings attracted an estimated total of 153 residents. In addition to posters and PowerPoint presentations, the town hall meetings featured several participatory exercises:

- **Voting exercises:** Community members were provided with six blue sticker dots upon arriving and later asked to place these dots next to hazard mitigation strategies they felt were most important. Attendees were given the full length of the town hall to contemplate their responses. In general, attendees were concerned with strengthening the resiliency of systems upon which residents depend on a daily basis. This included every single one of the City's proposed infrastructure strategies, such as enhancing the resiliency and redundancy of its electrical grid, and protecting and managing liquefied natural gas sites and city fueling stations before and during hazard events.
- **Budgeting exercises:** Participants were given "DP3 Dollars" and asked to allocate funding toward creating a more resilient Baltimore by placing money in the box or boxes that aligned with the strategies they favored. Residents slightly favored building resilient energy systems and strengthening stormwater and transportation infrastructure, with less but still notable support for human health programs, trees and greening, and alterations to building codes.

**2) Community meetings:** The DP3 project staff worked with a University of Maryland doctoral candidate to conduct community meetings focused



specifically on flood risk. Participants were given the opportunity to use one of two modeling methods to map flooding as a result of sea level rise and increased precipitation using collaborative learning techniques. DP3 planners also attended two community association meetings during an extended heat wave to distribute information about extreme heat and gauge resident awareness and preparedness.

**3) Surveys:** The DP3 public engagement process also included a Community Vulnerability Survey to gauge resident disaster awareness and preparedness. From our review, it is unclear how and where this survey was distributed, how many people took the survey, and what the results were. The survey consisted of a number of multiple choice and ranking exercises gauging residents' perception of the frequency of extreme weather, the availability of local resources, recent weather patterns, and the vulnerability of their immediate household.

**Summary:** Baltimore's sustainability plans offer valuable lessons for planning in Detroit, given the city's similar demographics, history of post-industrial economic malaise, and institutionalized racial and class divides. The City uses equity as its baseline approach, starting with its most vulnerable populations and prioritizing their input in all planning efforts. Most of the other plans in this survey are themed around climate change, but Baltimore's approach specifically focuses on disaster preparedness and hazard mitigation as a central tenet of future planning efforts, refusing to avoid the difficult truths of urban life in the decades to come. Finally, the City's disaster plan is very thorough in terms of transparency and documentation, featuring an extensive appendix detailing the purpose, location, and content of all outreach efforts.

# Boston, MA

**Overview:** Boston is currently in the final stages of *Imagine Boston 2030*, its first citywide plan in 50 years. The comprehensive plan places sustainability at its center, with an opening that states Boston is in a “uniquely powerful position to create quality jobs, strengthen our competitive economy, add the housing our city needs to become more affordable, and prepare for climate change.” Imagine Boston was heavily informed by public engagement, with the City boasting that the plan was shaped by more than 14,000 resident voices since September 2015. The plan follows a structure that opens with the general and narrows down to the specific, beginning with the overall municipal context, then identifying opportunities for growth and action items to help spur that growth. The plan then outlines initiatives in ten categories: housing; health and safety; education; economy; energy and environment; open space; transportation; technology; arts and culture; and land use and planning; as well as next steps for implementation of these initiatives.

**Demographics:** Boston has a comparable population size (650,281) to Detroit (690,074), but a much higher median income (\$55,777 to Detroit’s \$25,764) and a majority white population (53.0% compared with Detroit’s 13.4%). It has a notably lower homeownership rate (just 34.3%) than the other municipalities in this study except for Cambridge, likely owing to the large student population in both areas. Like the other cities surveyed, its poverty level (21.5%) is split across racial lines, with white residents skewing lower (16.4%) and black and Hispanic residents skewing higher (24.1% and 33.1%, respectively), all of which below Detroit’s overall poverty level (40.3%). In terms of regional characteristics, Boston is renowned for its intense local pride, and due to its location bordering the Atlantic Ocean, sea level rise and heavy flooding are particular concerns for sustainability and climate change efforts.

## Engagement techniques

**1) Postcards:** Throughout the spring of 2016, nearly 7,500 people responded to a survey asking the question, “What would you add or change to make your neighborhood an even better place to live?” The survey was available online, but many responses came via postcards that were themed around various sustainability subjects (such as improving the waterfront) and allowed residents a blank space to chime in with their own ideas. Excerpts from residents’ ideas are scattered throughout the Imagine Boston 2030 plan as breakout boxes.

**2) Building block exercise:** A 26-member engagement team talked to more than 1,400 residents at 52 community events, farmer’s markets and festivals citywide and conducted a physical planning exercise using building blocks. The exercise board represented three kinds of places in Boston: existing neighborhoods, high-rise areas like downtown and the Seaport, and neighborhood edges. Residents envisioned future growth by allocating blocks representing new housing and spaces to work in these different types of places. In addition, participants could add up to five blank blocks

Waterfront City  
**Imagine if we could transform Boston's harbor and riverfronts into the most exciting parts of the city.**

I would be excited about a waterfront that has...  
(Check all that appeal to you)

- ☒ Ferry service across and around the harbor
- ☒ Easy access from all neighborhoods
- ☐ Opportunities for kayaking, swimming, and boating
- ☒ A connected Harborwalk
- ☐ New signature waterfront parks
- ☐ Public art, cultural institutions, festivals, markets, and other programming

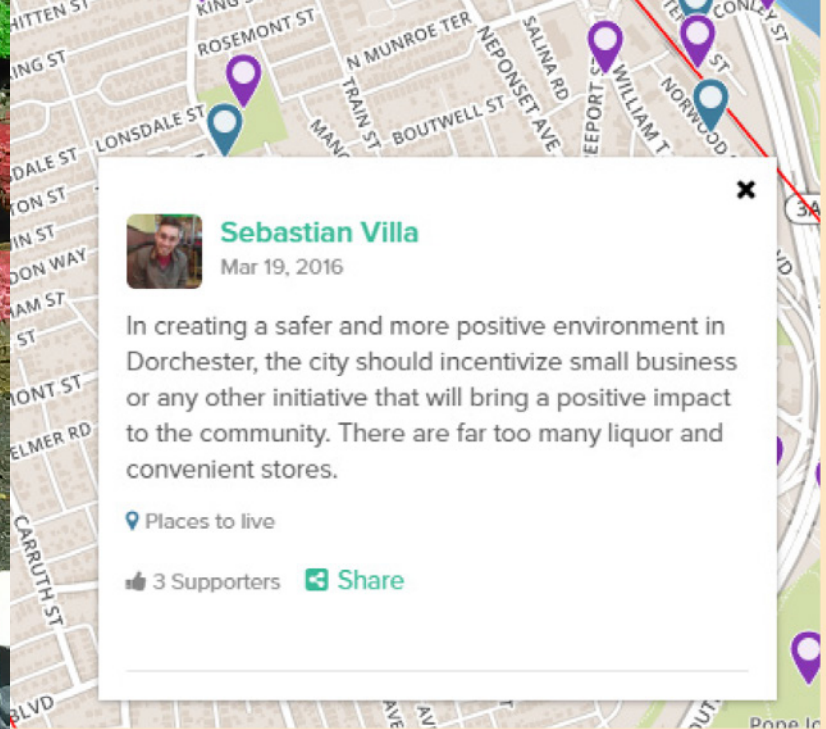
Rate this idea!  
☆☆☆☆☆

How would you make this idea better?  
*Think about providing water transportation to people in the East Boston waterfront area to the city to Alleviate Traffic*

Where do you live? (Zip code)  
*02121*

representing additional resources needed by neighborhoods. The exercise also incorporated climate change adaptation strategies, integrating seawalls and floodable marshes into neighborhood designs and elevated ground floors to buildings.

Participants in the exercise allocated nearly equal amounts of new housing to the three categories, suggesting that residents have a desire to increase housing affordability both in existing residential areas as well as areas that have historically been left out.



**3) Visioning kits:** The Imagine Boston team assembled visioning kits to allow any member of the public to host a discussion about the group’s vision and goals for Boston over the late spring and early summer of 2016. The kits were fully downloadable and contained maps, stickers, and facilitation instructions, and the introductory presentation

**4) Online and mobile mapping tool:** The City programmed a mapping tool using Google Maps where residents could mark specific locations and respond to the question “Where are there opportunities to enhance and grow Boston?” Other residents could create comment threads to respond to these ideas, and the map generated more than 1,000 ideas in total.

**5) Boston by the Numbers:** Imagine Boston 2030

and the Boston Planning & Development Agency’s (BPDA) Research Division hosted a series of public conversations centered on how Boston’s trends and data can help to guide the city’s future. Topics included understanding trends in Boston’s economy as well as its growing immigrant population, and PDFs of each presentation are archived on the Imagine Boston website.

**6) Community workshops:** Throughout summer 2016, the City held a series of Imagine Boston community workshops featuring an exercise in which residents were asked to rate emerging ideas in a dozen categories, giving them 1-5 stars based on their appeal. Participants then prioritized these ideas on an axis based on which ideas they felt were most important to their own life, and which were most important to the city as a whole.

**Summary:** Boston’s plan is notable for incorporating a complete, bottom-up public engagement effort into the City’s comprehensive plan, demonstrating that sustainability can be woven into the broader planning process rather than being siloed into its own separate document. The City’s most innovative public engagement strategies, including its building block exercise and online and mobile mapping tool, are examples of teaching residents that the built environment is something over which the public has control and agency. The City’s postcard strategy is also an example of an engagement approach with wide reach, and sprinkling responses throughout the draft plan indicates to residents that their voices were heard and reflected in the final document.

# Cambridge, MA

**Overview:** Cambridge's current comprehensive plan consists of a scattered group of policy documents, but the City recently embarked on *Envision Cambridge*, "a community-wide process to develop a comprehensive plan for a more livable, sustainable, and equitable Cambridge." The process is expected to last three years. The first, "Creating a Bold Vision," involves research, community ideas and input to identify challenges and opportunities to formulate a citywide vision, core values, and goals. The second (and current) year, "Setting Priorities," uses scenario planning to develop actionable recommendations. In the third year, "Developing an Action Plan," the City will incorporate their findings into a plan with short-, medium-, and long-term actions.

**Demographics:** Cambridge is home to a much higher percentage of white residents (67.7%) than Detroit (13.4%). The city also skews much younger (median age 27.8 to Detroit's 35.2) and wealthier (median income \$79,416 to Detroit's \$25,764), owing to the presence of prestigious universities such as Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). However, the wealth is inequitably distributed by race, with just 10.7% of white residents under the poverty line, in contrast with 26.4% of black residents and 26.3% of Hispanic residents. Envision Cambridge accordingly places special emphasis on diversity and equity, which can potentially serve as inspiration for public outreach in building Detroit's sustainability plan.

## Engagement techniques

**1) Online presence:** Envision Cambridge's website is an outstanding feature of the City's public engagement strategy. It is updated frequently, features a well-populated calendar of upcoming events, and describes every stage of the public process in detail. Particularly of note is the website's documents section, an exhaustive archive of PowerPoint presentations, meeting notes and agendas, public surveys, and other documents related to the engagement process. Envision Cambridge also has a presence on Twitter (#EnvisionCambridge) and Facebook.

**2) Surveys:** The project team has used a series of online and paper surveys to gather feedback on the plan at various stages. The surveys have invited residents to help name the plan, detail their vision for the city's future, and choose from a series of topic areas and phrases that reflect what they would like to see in the final plan.

**3) Panel discussions:** As of this writing, Envision has held two panel discussions titled "What's the Plan?" twice apiece, featuring panelists from City administration, consultants, and partnering organizations. The first provided an introduction to the planning team and a general overview of the project and its goals. The second focused on challenges and opportunities facing the city related to businesses and

commercial development, housing and affordability, mobility and transportation, climate change and resilience, and urban form.

**4) Public workshops:** Envision Cambridge has hosted several public workshops throughout the planning process to learn from the community on citywide topics. This has included three public "listening workshops," attended by an estimated 120 residents, where participants voted on the topics they most wanted to discuss and then split into smaller, themed groups for 30-minute discussions. Three invitation-only focus groups focused on minority and linguistically isolated groups, and the City also held two public drop-in sessions at senior centers.

**5) Working groups:** The project team has held numerous working groups to brainstorm strategies and move the process forward. These include Envision Alewife, intended to develop recommendations for the city's Alewife district, Engagement & Communications, who provide guidance and advice on how the citywide plan can best engage the entire community and represent the city's diversity, and topic-specific working groups on housing, climate and the environment, economic development, and transportation. Agendas and presentation slides for each working group meeting are available at the Envision Cambridge website.



**6) Community Engagement Team:** The project team partnered with Cambridge's Community Engagement Team (CET) to reach underserved Cambridge families through focus groups and surveys. The CET's outreach workers are community members from the American-born black, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Ethiopian, Haitian, Somali, Spanish and Arabic communities.

**7) Mobile Engagement Station:** Envision Cambridge's Street Team scheduled a series of sessions featuring a large, interactive table shaped like the city of Cambridge. On the table's surface is a printed map that community members can write or draw on with markers to give feedback on places in the city, and also features a 3D model showing the buildings in the city.

**8) Envision Cambridge Newspaper:** The Envision Cambridge Newspaper is a publication mimicking the aesthetic of weekly community newspapers, in-

tended to be distributed during other public outreach efforts. The newspaper provides updates on the planning process, highlights planning and policy issues, and offers in-depth stories about the community. There is only one issue so far (Summer 2016), but it is very thorough, featuring:

- Facts and figures about Cambridge demographics and land use
- A cut-out Envision Cambridge survey
- Explanation of citywide/comprehensive plans from three prominent local planners
- Article on the Mobile Engagement Station and schedule for when/where it has been
- Full-page Interview with Cambridge resident who moved to the city from Ethiopia
- Interviews with five residents from diverse backgrounds offering their perspectives on the same block (Central Square)
- A game ("The Zoning Zone") educating residents about what is allowed under current zoning

**Summary:** Cambridge's public engagement approach, though incomplete as of this writing, is impressive in the sheer amount of information it provides to the public as well as the number of innovative ways it finds to both solicit public input and disseminate information about the planning process. Efforts such as the Mobile Engagement Station and the Envision Cambridge Newspaper help to keep Envision Cambridge in the public mind while making the subject of sustainability planning accessible and friendly to a general audience. Furthermore, the sheer wealth of documentation on the Envision Cambridge website demonstrates an aggressive devotion to transparency in the engagement process.

# Charleston, SC

**Overview:** Charleston's *Charleston Green Plan Roadmap to Sustainability* is a collaboration between the City and the Charleston Green Committee, which consists of nearly 1,000 citizens representing small businesses, nonprofits, academia, technology, tourism and the general public. Upon its creation, the committee was tasked with creating a local action plan and developing civic policy recommendations for sustainability and climate change. The plan's overarching goal is to continue Charleston's shift to a more sustainable and profitable future, with goals including emissions reduction, better buildings, renewable energy, building an innate pedestrian network, improved transportation, and zero waste.

**Demographics:** Charleston is the largest city in South Carolina but its population is notably lower than Detroit's, with 127,694 residents to Detroit's 690,074. The vast majority of the population is white (73.9%), with 24.6% of residents black and 2.9% of residents identifying as Hispanic. Compared with Detroit, the city has a relatively low poverty rate (17.8%) but large wealth inequality by race, with just 12.1% of white residents below the poverty line, compared with 33.9% of black residents and 26.5% of Hispanic residents.

## Engagement techniques

Charleston's plan touts the City's high level of public engagement, but offers few concrete examples of how public outreach actually informed the composition of the plan. Most of what Charleston's plan has to offer is its focus on educating the public during the plan process.

**1) Education Subcommittee:** The Education Subcommittee worked to support the implementation of sustainability action items in the Charleston Green Plan through education and awareness efforts. The subcommittee acts as a research and resource base, and its efforts have included training volunteers to collect recyclables at city events and creating a resource guide on the web for residents interested in weatherizing their homes.

**2) The Green Connection:** The Green Committee kept residents updated on the progress of the Charleston Green Plan via a weekly newsletter, all of which are archived online from 2009 to 2012. This newsletter provides information regarding local, regional, and national climate change and sustainability issues. Issues inform the public about meetings of the Green Com-



mittee and Education Subcommittee, as well as other environmental education opportunities in Charleston and the greater region.

**3) Public meetings:** The planning process included 26 meetings and 120 subcommittee meetings, which allowed for contributions from more than 800 individuals.

**Summary:** The City of Charleston emphasizes its public engagement strategy in the text of its sustainability plan, but offers few truly innovative strategies in practice. However, the City's frequently published sustainability newsletter, as well as its establishment of a subcommittee devoted to public sustainability education, are potentially useful strategies that could prove valuable to Detroit in the long term.

# Grand Rapids, MI

**Overview:** The City of Grand Rapids has adopted a unique approach to sustainability planning. Individual City departments follow actions and strategies outlined in a five-year Sustainability Plan, with the administering Office of the Environment and Sustainability issuing an annual progress report to keep departments on track and accountable. However, the City's Green Grand Rapids plan, a 2012 update and amendment to the City's 2002 master plan, offers more direct lessons on public engagement. Green Grand Rapids places an emphasis on "thinking green," with new sections in three broad categories: Balanced Transportation, A City That Enriches Our Lives, and A City in Balance with Nature, plus guidelines for implementation. An introductory chapter outlines the extensive public input the City sought in constructing the plan amendment.

**Demographics:** Grand Rapids is climbing out of the same economic malaise that gripped Detroit, but is in somewhat better fiscal shape, with a median income of \$40,355 (compared with Detroit's \$25,764). Its median age (31.1) skews lower than Detroit's (35.2), in large part because Grand Rapids is a college town, with at least 15 institutions of higher learning in the metro area. In terms of racial makeup, the vast majority of the city is white (68.4%), with only 20.4% black residents and 15.6% of residents identifying as Hispanic. The city's poverty level is lower than Detroit's but still notable (26.0%), and whereas Detroit's poverty level is even across racial lines, in Grand Rapids, the poverty rate for white residents (20.0%) is just less than half of that for black residents (40.7%), with the poverty level for Hispanic residents (35.2%) not far behind.

## Engagement techniques

**1) "Green Pursuits":** The engagement process began with Green Pursuits, a board game specifically designed for the Grand Rapids master plan update process. Volunteer citizen planners organized groups to play the game in board rooms, classrooms and living rooms across the city. The game contained a series of question cards, in the style of the popular trivia game "Trivial Pursuit," and a corresponding answer booklet to record participants' input. Participants used a game board (in the form of a city map) to record suggestions for where to focus efforts in greening streets, adding parks, improving nonmotorized connections, and improving recreational opportunities on the Grand River. Questions included:

- If you could preserve one existing green space, what would it be?
- Would you give up on-street parking for a bike lane?
- How many stormwater management techniques or re-use applications can you think of?
- Where is the best Grand River experience?
- Do/would you use a community garden?

**2) Design charrettes:** Grand Rapids enlisted the community's help in developing concept plans for four parks and four special studies along the Grand River



using a series of design charrettes. Charrettes are an iterative process in which the design team, including community participants, quickly develops ideas based on project constraints and a public vision, presents them for review and critique, and then refines them for further review and critique in a series of feedback

loops. For Green Grand Rapids, this included a future riverwalk extension, a whitewater “rapids” course on the downtown segment of the river, river corridor guidelines for the preservation and restoration of riparian buffers, and the redevelopment of a City-owned riverfront parcel.

**3) “Green Gatherings”:** The City held community forums at key milestones in the planning process, to solicit input on how accurately citizen input was being synthesized and interpreted.

- **Green Gathering #1 (“Ideas”):** The first gathering was intended to examine what had been learned in the early stages of data collection and research (including the first games of Green Pursuits), fill in any forgotten pieces, and help chart a course for ideas of importance that citizens wish to see examined and discussed.
- **Green Gathering #2 (“Choices”):** At the second gathering, residents provided input on draft objectives and policies and identified top priority policies for sustainability, in an effort to have a meaningful discussion about the political and fiscal realities that challenge the Grand Rapids community.
- **Green Gathering #3 (“Actions”):** At the third gathering, residents were introduced to “green champions,” representatives from organizations that already had plans and programs in place to move portions of the Green Grand Rapids agenda forward. Residents also reviewed and commented on the concept plans generated during the design charrette workshops.
- **Green Gathering #4 (“Call to Action”):** At the fourth and final gathering, the City’s “green champions” introduced ongoing and new initiatives to encourage coordination and invite citizens to get involved in the sustainability planning process.

**Summary:** One of the most interesting aspects of Green Grand Rapids is how it differs from the City’s actual Sustainability Plan, which involved little in the way of public engagement and is primarily intended as an internal benchmarking document for City departments. In contrast, Green Grand Rapids has a personable tone, is beautifully designed, and features a lengthy section devoted to how the City conducted its public engagement strategy. Otherwise, the City’s primary innovation lies in the interactivity of its strategies: design charrettes and the “Green Pursuits” game are examples of how to incorporate public input in an accessible way that involves residents without talking down to them.



# Milwaukee, WI

**Overview:** Milwaukee's *ReFresh Milwaukee Sustainability Plan* is the product of the Milwaukee Green Team, a coalition of representatives from City departments and environmental NGOs. The plan is divided into the goals of sustainable building; energy; food systems; human capital; land and urban ecosystems; mobility; resource recovery; water; the inner harbor; and HOME GR/OWN, an initiative that transforms vacant lots into green spaces. The plan also outlines several "catalytic projects" that cross multiple sectors, and guidelines for implementation.

**Demographics:** Milwaukee is similar to Detroit in population size but has a different racial makeup. In contrast with Detroit's sizable majority of black residents, Milwaukee has a plurality of white residents and roughly double Detroit's proportion of Hispanic residents. However, much like Detroit, Milwaukee is deeply racially segregated, with black residents concentrated in the city limits and white residents settled along the Lake Michigan waterfront and western suburban fringe. Hispanic residents concentrated in the southern reaches of Milwaukee.

## Engagement techniques

**1) Surveys:** The Milwaukee Green Team collected a total of 1,011 responses to a survey available online at the Milwaukee Office of Environmental Sustainability (OES) website, with hard copies of the survey were handed out at town hall meetings and informal outreach sessions. The survey was available in both English and Spanish. The survey asked for each respondent's ZIP code, aldermanic district, and age, to evaluate how well the sample represented the population.

The survey consisted of eight multiple choice questions. Several questions allowed residents to choose more than one option. One question required that respondents choose from among a series of pictures that represented different ideas about sustainability. A majority of survey respondents were in the 20-30 age range, followed by the 31-40 and 41-50 ranges. Common themes among the responses included that the City should adopt a long-term perspective on sustainability planning, as well as a focus on social equity and environmental considerations. Residents cited children's education and unemployment as the most significant barriers to implementing a sustainability agenda. Perhaps most tellingly, residents overwhelmingly responded that community involvement and feedback were critical

to bringing about positive changes in Milwaukee.

**2) Town halls:** In partnership with aldermen and the nonprofit Urban Ecology Center, the Green Team hosted five town hall meetings between July and September 2012. The meetings began with an overview of sustainability planning by the Green Team's chair. Afterwards, attendees could visit different tables staffed by members of the team. Each table represented a specific topic (e.g. energy, transportation) of the final sustainability plan. Team members at each table collected feedback from members of the public, and notes were taken throughout the meetings. An estimated 120 members of the public attended the town halls.

**3) Outreach sessions:** The Green Team hosted a combination of informal outreach sessions targeted at the general public, as well as three outreach sessions and a conference call aimed at local businesses. The informal sessions had a conversational tone, and included both one-on-one discussions with sustainability experts as well as broader sustainability discussions. The team conducted an estimated 30 sessions in 2012 and 2013, with participation by approximately 300 people.

**Summary:** The City's strategy consisted of a combination of surveys and public meetings. Its survey effort focused on sustainability in the broadest sense, with no regionally targeted questions or content: the survey could be administered in literally any American city. Perhaps reflecting the limited scope of the effort, public involvement was meager: in a city of nearly 600,000 residents, roughly 435 people attended in-person meetings, and just over 1,000 residents took the survey. Milwaukee's public outreach methods are rather generic and seem to represent minimal outreach for compiling a sustainability plan with the public's assistance.

# New York, NY

**Overview:** Originally released in 2007 under the name “PlaNYC,” New York City’s *One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City* serves as a roadmap to further the city’s economic growth, sustainability, and resiliency while also addressing issues of equity. The plan establishes key milestones structured around four visions: a growing/thriving city; a just/equitable city; a sustainable city; and a resilient city. The plan calls on assistance from the City’s regional partners, and sets goals and targets that are both aspirational and achievable, encompassing both short-term actions and ambitious plans for the future.

**Demographics:** New York City is truly one of a kind within the United States, and makes for a difficult direct comparison to Detroit. Each one of its five boroughs is the size of a major U.S. city, and encompass a wide range of racial enclaves, classes, and distinctive local cultures. With demographics varying so heavily by borough, the most useful direct comparison to draw is the city’s poverty level (20.6%), which, like many of the other cities in this study, demonstrates a sharp racial divide. The city’s white population sits below the average poverty level, at 15.3%, while its black and Hispanic populations are at 23.2% and 29.0%, respectively.

## Engagement techniques

**1) Advisory Board:** A 38-person Sustainability Advisory Board represents all five NYC boroughs (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island) and consists of civic leaders, policy specialists, and community leaders, representing sectors including sustainability, social services, the business community, academia, real estate, and health care, and serves to provide expert and technical advice.

### 2) Surveys:

- **Online survey:** More than 7,500 New Yorkers took an online public survey that asked residents for their input. The survey asked: “One way to create a better New York City is to \_\_\_\_” and “Please check off the box or boxes below which best relate to your idea” (Housing, affordability, education, jobs, health, infrastructure, public services, public safety, connecting government and communities, environment, technology). The City received responses in seven different languages. Respondents overwhelmingly mentioned that their primary concerns were the high cost of living and affordable housing.
- **Phone survey:** The City also surveyed 800 New Yorkers by phone to identify key issues and con-

cerns. Among responders, 29% identified education as the most important issue facing New York City today followed by 20% identifying housing, and 15% identifying jobs. The phone conversations were converted into a word cloud, demonstrating that “diversity” is by far the word that showed up the most.

**3) Resident outreach:** The City met face-to-face with over 1,300 New York City residents, who attended more than 40 community meetings spanning every borough. This included advocacy groups, roundtable discussions, and 11 town-hall-style forums, as well as one-on-one meetings with elected officials. The City discussed issues regarding senior citizens, schools, housing, the environment, parks, and transportation.

**4) Business roundtable:** The City also met with many of New York City’s largest and most innovative employers to gauge input on what they need to succeed, to retain workers, to hire new ones, and to grow. The discussed real estate needs, workforce transportation, broadband infrastructure, child care services, and the importance of the city’s cultural community.

**Summary:** With too many moving parts to count, New York is too large, unwieldy and distinctive of an urban machine to offer many direct lessons for a Detroit sustainability plan effort. Additionally, the City’s plan is light on providing specific details surrounding how it conducted its town halls and community meetings. However, its surveys provide an example of how to cast a wide net and attract responses from a diverse array of populations, with the city’s diversity almost universally recognized as its strongest asset.

# St. Louis, MO

**Overview:** St. Louis' *Sustainability Plan* opens with the mission statement, "The City of St. Louis harnesses the strength and spirit of its diverse community to create an economically, socially and ecologically vibrant City for present and future generations — one that dynamically serves those who live, work, and play in the City's rich and celebrated historic landscape." Rather than outlining a specific course of action, the plan provides an overarching framework of sustainability opportunities for the city. The plan is organized into seven "functional categories," including Urban Character, Vitality & Ecology; Arts, Culture & Innovation; Empowerment, Diversity & Equity; Health, Wellbeing & Safety; Infrastructure, Facilities & Transportation; Education, Training & Leadership; and Prosperity, Opportunity & Employment.

**Demographics:** St. Louis is a relatively low-income city, with a median income of \$35,599 and 27.1% of the population below the poverty line, comparable to if not quite as low as Detroit's median income of \$25,764 and poverty level of 40.3%. The city's racial makeup consists of 45.7% white residents, 47.7% black residents, and 3.7% of residents identifying as Hispanic. However, it is missing the full picture in St. Louis to leave out the neighboring city of East St. Louis, IL, whose population is 95.7% black, 45.4% of whom are below the federal poverty level. Though East St. Louis falls outside the St. Louis jurisdiction (and the state), income inequality is an issue within the St. Louis city limits as well, with a black poverty level of 38.1% compared with 15.1% of white residents.

## Engagement techniques

**1) Community Sustainability Survey:** The City issued a survey to gauge sustainability attitudes and perceptions from those who live, work, or play in St. Louis. The sustainability plan project team launched a non-randomized survey questionnaire that was piloted in September 2011, and ran officially between October and December 2011. The survey was available electronically via Zoomerang and in paper format. The Neighborhood Stabilization Officer network distributed the survey in order to gain a diverse response rate.

Excluding the demographic questions, the survey contained three sustainability-related questions and one general comment question; however, only two of the questions (and their accompanying responses) are included in the text of the plan. Question one was "What words or phrases would you use to describe the qualities, features and/or programs that make a "Sustainable" City?" The top three characteristics were: Safe streets and neighborhoods, Good public transit, and Equitable recycling and composting programs. Question two was: "please rate your perception of the following characteristics as they relate to the City of St. Louis, as a whole" (from a list of 31 characteristics). Residents rated the top three characteristics as drinking water quality, architectural character and quality,

and arts and cultural opportunities.

A total of 1,169 respondents completed the survey. One thousand one hundred and forty-nine respondents (98%) provided residential ZIP code data, indicating that slightly more than 80% of respondents resided within the St. Louis city limits.

**2) Mayor's Sustainability Summits:** The City conducted two sustainability summits to engage the community at large, raise awareness about sustainability in St. Louis, celebrate successes, and communicate the mayor's commitment to making the city more sustainable. The first summit was themed "Imagine," featuring:

- Four work sessions and talks by national leaders and practitioners in sustainable planning, including Majora Carter, sustainability activist from the South Bronx, NY, Jim Hunt, Boston's Chief of Environment and Energy, and John Norquist, former mayor of Milwaukee, WI
  - A series of four "one-word" response exercises where attendees' responses were compiled into "word cloud" diagrams:
  - **Prompt:** One Word That Comes to Mind About the City of St Louis NOW
- Top responses:** Fragmented, Segregated, Vi-

### Exercise 1a: One Word That Comes To Mind About The City of St Louis NOW



- brant, Integrated
- Prompt:** One Word That Comes to Mind About the City of St Louis IN THE FUTURE  
**Top responses:** Vibrant, Progressive, Prosperous, Integrated, Diverse, Leader
- Prompt:** One Word That You Would Use to Describe What Could Be a UNIQUE CHARACTERISTIC of a Sustainable City of St Louis  
**Top responses:** Neighborhoods, Education reform
- Prompt:** One Word That Describes a Specific BOLD ACTION for a Sustainable City of St. Louis (by the Private / Non-Profit Sector)  
**Top responses:** Investment in City, Funding, Bureaucracy
- Prompt:** One Word That Describes a Specific BOLD ACTION for a Sustainable City of St. Louis (by the City of St Louis)  
**Top responses:** Education reform, Collabora-

**Summary:** From the information on the City’s website, St. Louis’ sustainability strategy appears very top-down, particularly when one considers the city’s deep issues with poverty and equity. It has the air of a sustainability plan created because sustainability is in vogue, not because it is a necessary step for America’s cities. The survey questions and community exercises are of the sort that one would find at a corporate retreat, centered on broad platitudes and buzzwords instead of illuminating the nuts and bolts of what makes a planning effort come together. For the purposes of this report, the City of St. Louis’ engagement strategy is included as an example of a less successful sustainability outreach effort.

### Exercise 4: One Word That Describes the MAJOR CHALLENGE to a Sustainable City of St Louis



- **Prompt:** One Word That Describes the MAJOR CHALLENGE to a Sustainable City of St. Louis  
**Top responses:** Funding, Fragmentation, Attitude, Education, Bureaucracy, Complacency, Transportation

The second summit was themed “Innovate” and focused on the ongoing plan and determining whether anything was missing. Four engagement sessions were held over a three-day period. The community workshops were co-hosted by the East-West Gateway Council of Governments. The summit consisted of a work session and three workshops, with an estimated total of 205 attendees across the four sessions. The sessions employed a keypad polling exercise where participants selected top priorities and were then asked to brainstorm relationships and potential synergies among the top-rated objectives for their session.

# Washington, DC

**Overview:** Washington, DC's *Sustainability DC* plan was the result of 18 months of planning and outreach efforts by the District's Green Ribbon Committee and its Green Cabinet. The Green Ribbon Committee, made up of community leaders from public, private, and nonprofit sectors, took a big picture view of the planning effort and assured that interests of the district's diverse community was represented. The Green Cabinet, comprising agency directors led by the City Administrator, focused on promoting inter-agency coordination and determining how the district's government could align the agencies individual and shared missions to achieve the plan's goals. The plan outlines four underlying challenges: jobs/economy, health/wellness, equity/diversity, and climate/environment. The solutions highlighted include: the built environment, energy, food, nature, transportation, waste, and water.

**Demographics:** Washington, DC, has a similar population size to Detroit (647,484 residents to Detroit's 690,074) and a plurality of black residents, 48.9% of the population. The district's median income (\$70,848) is nearly triple that of Detroit's (\$25,764), with 18% of residents earning incomes below the federal poverty line. The income and poverty figures viewed together indicate a particularly high level of income inequality, likely attributable to the clustering of career politicians and lobbyists in the nation's capital. The district represents one of the sharpest divisions of poverty level by race, with just 7.7% of white residents sitting below the poverty line, compared with 26.6% of black residents and 16.0% of Hispanic residents. The district is also highly segregated, with white residents clustering in the downtown area and the more affluent suburbs to the northwest, and black and Hispanic residents clustered in lower-income areas surrounding the Anacostia River.

## Engagement techniques

### 1) "Start in September" Outreach Campaign:

This month-long community outreach campaign began the planning effort. The planning team met with community members from all eight of the district's wards during 24 public meetings and community events ranging from small group conversations to large neighborhood festivals and district-wide celebrations. Ideas gathered during these events and from feedback given on the [sustainable.dc.gov](http://sustainable.dc.gov) website acted as the basis for further community conversations.

**2) Community outreach efforts:** The planning team talked with over 4,700 people at more than 180 events across the district. Overall, more than 1,300 unique ideas were submitted. The events included Seniors Going Green, aimed at elderly residents in the districts Ward 5, and the Green Zone Employment Program to provide green jobs for youths in Ward 8.

**3) Working groups:** The District held nine working group sessions in total, each group focusing on a different topic of sustainability: the built environment, climate, energy, food, nature, transportation, waste, water, and the green economy. Over 700 community

members volunteered to meet every other week to develop more than 900 recommendations that set broad goals that plan further built upon. Each working group independently identified jobs, health, equity, and education as factors that are key to making the district more sustainable.

**4) Community conversations:** The District convened a series of four community conversations to discuss the sustainability factors that resulted from the working group sessions. Participants identified barriers to sustainable outcomes, proposed better ways to connect to hard-to-reach communities, and further refined the plan's visions and goals.

**5) Focus groups:** In an effort to understand what sustainability-related issues resonate with hard-to-reach communities, the District conducted a series of focus groups in Wards 1, 5, 7, and 8, with an emphasis on low-income individuals, high school and college-aged youth, seniors, and Spanish speakers. To accommodate disabled residents, the organizers secured four community-based wheelchair-accessible locations within walking distance from a Metro rail station with-



in each ward. A total of 180 people were screened via the phone and 12 participants were chosen from each ward; for a total of 41 participants.

A key takeaway from the focus groups was that the word “sustainability” was unfamiliar to many participants, especially people without a college degree. However, once participants had a better understanding of what sustainability entailed, they had a positive reaction to it. Moreover, many participants felt that the plan was designed more for residents living in the Northwest quadrant, as well as new residents the District was trying to attract. They also noted that some of the plan’s goals are too lofty and so long-term that people would not be motivated to take immediate

action.

Participants observed that “high-tech” and “low-tech” communications channels reach different sets of audiences, and also concluded that bus stops are the most frequented areas of the district, which could make for a great communications channel. Participants also believed that targeted outreach to youth is the best hope for the plan’s success. In terms of branding, the logo, when shown on its own, was not well received, but when paired with concrete and actionable items, the logo received a more positive response. A lengthy document summarizing the focus group process is available on the official Sustainable DC website.

**Summary:** Washington, DC’s public engagement strategies are generally pretty conventional, consisting of a mixture of working groups, town-hall-style conversations, and focus groups. The primary inspiration that Detroit’s sustainability effort can draw from their example is the thorough documentation of the District’s focus group efforts, which helped to highlight its deep structural inequalities, the limitations of engagement strategies geared toward the elite, and whether the term “sustainability” has reach and meaning for lower-income populations.

# Appendix: Demographic information

Source: American Community Survey (2015): Five-Year Estimates

Municipality	<b>Detroit, MI</b>	<b>Austin, TX</b>	<b>Baltimore, MD</b>	<b>Boston, MA</b>	<b>Charleston, SC</b>	<b>Cambridge, MA</b>
Population	690,074	887,061	622,454	650,281	127,694	107,916
Median age	35.2	32.1	34.6	31.6	33.8	27.8
% White	13.4	75	30.3	53	73.9	67.7
% African American	80.1	7.7	63	25.5	24.6	10.6
% Hispanic	7.7	34.5	4.6	18.8	2.9	8
Median household income	\$25,764	\$57,689	\$42,241	\$55,777	\$55,546	\$79,416
% Under poverty line	40.3	18	23.7	21.5	17.8	14
% White under poverty line	39.6	16.3	13.8	16.4	12.1	10.7
% African American under poverty line	40.1	26.6	28.1	24.1	33.9	26.4
% Hispanic under poverty line	42.6	27.9	25.5	33.1	26.5	26.3
% Home ownership	49.4	44.8	47.1	34.3	53.5	37.1

Municipality	<b>Grand Rapids, MI</b>	<b>Milwaukee, WI</b>	<b>New York City, NY</b>	<b>St. Louis, MO</b>	<b>Washington, DC</b>
Population	192,416	599,498	8,426,743	317,850	647,484
Median age	31.1	31.1	35.8	34.6	33.7
% White	68.4	46.9	43.3	45.7	40.2
% African American	20.4	39.3	24.5	47.7	48.9
% Hispanic	15.6	18	28.9	3.7	10.2
Median household income	\$40,355	\$35,958	\$53,373	\$35,599	\$70,848
% Under poverty line	26	28.7	20.6	27.1	18
% White under poverty line	20	18.4	15.3	15.1	7.7
% African American under poverty line	40.7	39.2	23.2	38.1	26.6
% Hispanic under poverty line	35.2	33.3	29	27.1	16
% Home ownership	54.3	42.3	31.8	43.9	41.2