

# The Highway System Plan's Approach to Equity

State departments of transportation have implemented programs to meet USDOT's [Environmental Justice](#) and [Title VI](#) requirements for many years. Yet there is widespread community and industry acknowledgement these programs are not enough to address systemic transportation disparities

## Recent efforts to address equity

Washington's legislature created the Environmental Justice Task Force in 2019 to strengthen the state's role in addressing issues of race, equity, diversity and inclusion. The Task Force issued a [report](#) last year that includes goal, policy, mapping, and community engagement recommendations. In 2021, the Governor created a [State Office of Equity](#) to help agencies develop their own diversity, equity, and inclusion plans or enhance plans that are already in place. Additionally, the 2021 Legislature enacted the [HEAL Act](#), directing state agencies to implement recommendations from the Environmental Justice Task Force.

In support of furthering equity, WSDOT led an effort by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) to adopt a [Resolution Addressing Race, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) in November 2020. The resolution was adopted unanimously by the AASHTO Board, comprised of the chief executive officers of every state department of transportation in the nation. The resolution addressed protecting all people from discrimination in the delivery of transportation programs and services and inclusion through more effective public engagement processes, especially in historically underserved communities.

## Development of the Approach

The Highway System Plan's approach to equity is based on the recommendations of the Environmental Justice Task Force and discussions with WSDOT's Office of Equal Opportunity and Environmental Services Office. The Highway System Plan Advisory Committee, Internal Alignment Group, and Steering Committee also provided input and feedback that informed the final approach.

**Environmental Justice is:** "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, rules, and policies. Environmental justice includes addressing disproportionate environmental and health impacts in all laws, rules, and policies with environmental impacts by prioritizing vulnerable populations and overburdened communities, the equitable distribution of resources and benefits, and eliminating harm."

HEAL Act (E2SSB 5141.SL)  
Effective date 7/25/2021.



"This past year was an important one for bringing justice, equity, diversity and inclusion to light and renewing our commitment to an environment that honors and respects all people, of all colors, backgrounds and abilities."

*Roger Millar, WSDOT Secretary, 2021  
State of Transportation*

## Steps in the approach

The Highway System Plan will follow six analysis steps adapted from the Government Alliance on Race & Equity's [Racial Equity Toolkit](#). This approach was recommended by the Environmental Justice Task Force and endorsed by the Highway System Plan Advisory Committee, Internal Alignment Group, and Steering Committee.

- **Step 1. What are the desired outcomes?**
- **Step 2. What does the data tell us?**
- **Step 3. How should we engage the community?**
- **Step 4. Who benefits? Who is burdened?**
- **Step 5. What strategies or mitigation should we pursue?**
- **Step 6. How will we hold ourselves accountable?**

## Step 1. What are the desired outcomes?



### Outcome statement

The desired outcome of the Highway System Plan's equity approach is that state transportation investments are balanced across programs in a way that:

- Protects and improves health, safety, and accessibility outcomes for overburdened populations, especially communities of color, populations with limited English proficiency, low-income communities, and persons with disabilities.
- Addresses WSDOT's role in transportation-adjacent issues like homelessness and human trafficking.

Overburdened populations are populations who have experienced disproportionate environmental and health impacts and should be prioritized for equitably distributing resources and benefits and eliminating harm. This definition comes from the following document: [Environmental Justice Task Force: Recommendations for Prioritizing EJ in Washington State Government, Fall 2020](#).

### A note on geographic balance

Geographic balance came up in many of our conversations about equity. Proponents for including geographic balance within the framework of social equity mentioned several desired outcomes:

### Populations of focus

- Communities of color
- Limited English proficiency
- Low-income communities
- Persons with disabilities

- Ensuring low-income rural areas and tribal lands are equitably addressed.
- Preventing rural needs from being eclipsed by urban needs.
- Acknowledging political realities.

The first bullet is covered in the adopted outcome statement above. However, some expressed concern that incorporating the second two bullets in the equity approach would dilute the agency's focus on overburdened populations. Focusing on communities of color, populations with limited English proficiency, persons with disabilities, and low-income communities, WSDOT addresses those who are most marginalized and at risk. Informed by this debate, this approach will separate the issue of geographic balance from equity. Urban and rural balance and political considerations will be assessed independently of equity in a different section of the Highway System Plan.

### Additional demographic characteristics for future exploration

Some members of the Highway System Plan Advisory Committee, Internal Alignment Group, and Steering Committee suggested broadening the populations of focus by adding:

- Indigenous communities (Indigenous communities are already included in communities of color).
- Persons with health conditions like asthma that are not considered disabilities but are affected by transportation decisions.
- Persons with special transportation needs, as defined in the Human Services Transportation Plan. (Note: Persons, including their personal attendants, who because of physical or mental disability, income status, or age are unable to transport themselves or purchase transportation.)
- People who don't own cars.

While the groups described in the last three bullets are not named as overburdened populations in the Environmental Justice final report, they merit exploration in the interest of achieving the highest attainable environmental quality and health outcomes for all people (one of five environmental justice principles adopted by the Environmental Justice Task Force). Where data is available, the analysis team will explore these demographic characteristics and evaluate them for future inclusion in the populations of focus if they are associated with disparities in accessibility and environmental health outcomes.

## Step 2. What does the data tell us?



In initial discussions about equity, the Highway System Plan Steering Committee identified potential issues of interest that can be investigated using data, such as:

- To what extent do certain communities bear greater burdens from the transportation system (such as poor air quality)?
- Do communities have equitable walking, biking, transit, and driving access to opportunities?
- Are transportation resources invested equitably across communities?

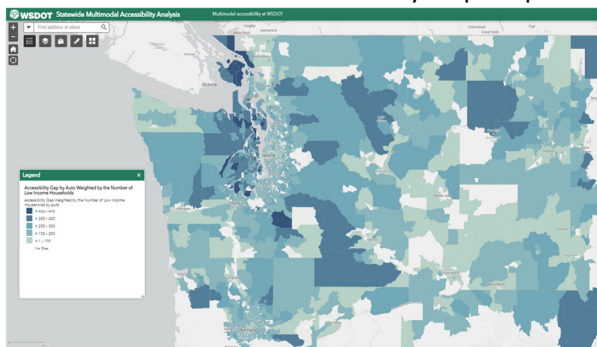
### Data sources

To begin to address these questions, the Highway System Plan's equity analysis will draw primarily on WSDOT's Statewide Accessibility Gap Maps and the Department of Health's Environmental Health Disparities Map.

### Statewide Accessibility Gap Maps

Multimodal accessibility measures the ease of reaching destinations by different travel modes. WSDOT produced a beta version of maps

Statewide Multimodal Accessibility Gap Maps

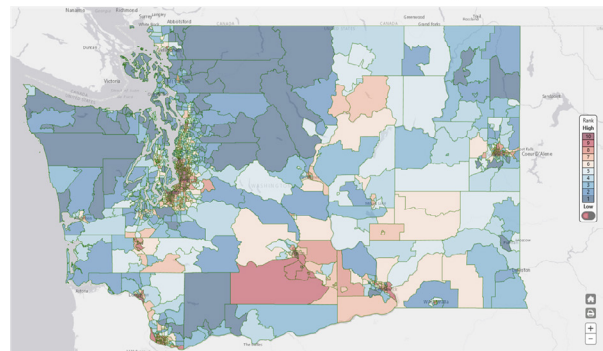


identifying gaps in statewide accessibility using Cube Access, a GIS plug-in for measuring multimodal accessibility. The maps identify auto and transit accessibility gaps and demographic characteristics by census block group.

### Environmental Health Disparities Map

The [Environmental Health Disparities Map](#) is a cumulative impact map that compares census tracts across Washington for environmental health disparities. The maps were developed through community, academic, and government agency collaboration. The Environmental Justice Task Force recommends state agencies use the map and data to improve accountability, engagement, and transparency towards Environmental Justice goals.

Environmental Health Disparities Map



### Additional data sources for future exploration

Members of the Highway System Plan Advisory Committee, Internal Alignment Group, and Steering Committee also suggested exploring the following data sources:

- Census Bureau Community Resilience Estimates.
- Center for Disease Control Social Vulnerability Index.
- Housing and Transportation Affordability Toolkit.

The Highway System Plan equity analysis will investigate and assess these proposed data sources and include them if the data is relevant, complete, reliable, and does not duplicate the data included in the statewide accessibility gap and environmental health disparities maps.

Based on advice from the Highway System Plan Advisory Committee, the project team will reach out to MPOs, RTPOs and other transportation stakeholders for feedback on data sources and uses prior to summarizing and presenting the analysis as a data-based story.

The EJTF recommends using data to:	The Highway System Plan will use data to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build demographic and environmental context to guide and inform place-based activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish outreach goals.</li> <li>• Identify socioeconomic gaps and disparities by geography.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Center EJ as the priority intended outcome in resource allocation decision processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform project selection criteria.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate and measure reductions in disparities through service equity improvements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommend how to evaluate and report future progress.</li> </ul>

### Applying the analysis

The Highway System Plan will implement the Environmental Justice Task Force’s (EJTF) recommendations on using data according to the above table:

It’s important to note the assessment of equity data will join other analysis (for example, evaluating the system performance implications of different levels of program investment) to inform decision makers.

## Step 3. How should we engage the community?

The Highway System Plan’s community engagement activities will follow the guidance of WSDOT’s [Community Engagement Plan, Title VI Implementation Plan, Limited English Proficiency Accessibility Plan](#), and the recommendations of the Environmental Justice Task Force. These activities support WSDOT’s strategic plan Inclusion goal – to strengthen commitment to diversity and engagement in all WSDOT’s business processes, functions and services to ensure every voice is heard. The project team will:

- **Identify stakeholders.** Identify who is served and affected by the plan.
- **Establish outreach goals.** Use a systematic process to determine outreach goals, weighing the goals of the plan with its potential for impact to overburdened communities to determine the level of engagement based on the [IAP2 Spectrum](#)

### Highway System Plan engagement practices

- Identify stakeholders.
- Establish outreach goals.
- Align outreach opportunities to key points in the planning process to influence decisions.
- Screen to understand needs.
- Identify outreach and communication methods.
- Reduce barriers to engagement.
- Tailor for indigenous people.

[of Public Participation](#) (Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, Empower).

- **Align outreach opportunities to key points in the planning process to influence decisions.** The key points of influence for the Highway System Plan are:
  - Creation of investment scenarios.
  - Selection of the recommended scenario.
  - Request for comments on the draft plan.
- **Screen to understand needs.** Understand the nature and needs of people who may be impacted, especially changes to critical determinants of health such as legal rights, finances, housing, and safety. That starts with the Accessibility and Environmental Health Disparities mapping tools mentioned earlier and also includes a review of the results of past engagement (including public input provided during the development of the Washington Transportation Plans), a public survey, and an online open house.
- **Identify outreach and communication methods.** Use communication methods that are meaningful to the specific audience: using plain talk (including writing for people with varying levels of literacy), transcreation (adapting content from one language to another while maintaining the existing tone, intent and style); providing good visuals, partnering with key stakeholders who already educate and engage community members, providing meaningful access to people with disabilities, and using culturally appropriate communication. The project team will also plan engagement opportunities to meet communities

where they are, rather than relying solely on WSDOT-sponsored events and tools.

- **Reduce barriers to engagement.** Identify ways to reduce barriers to engagement such as caregiving responsibilities, travel expenses, access, apathy/burden, communication, potential for influence, representation, process, resources, sovereignty, trust, and types of knowledge. For the Highway System Plan's public engagement survey, the project team is working with the University of Washington Transportation Center (UW TRAC) to ensure representation of overburdened populations. Some common research practices that may be applied are oversampling and incentives.
- **Tailor for Indigenous people.** The Highway System Plan has the potential to impact indigenous people and will develop strategies to reach out to these communities in the community engagement plan, using tailored approaches based on the needs of the community. Additionally, WSDOT will formally consult with tribes in accordance with the WSDOT Tribal Communication and Consultation Protocols for Statewide Policy Issues.

The Highway System Plan is using a scenario planning approach to explore difficult tradeoffs, set performance expectations, and make recommendations on investing transportation funds and stewarding the transportation system. The central equity question is, how might different investment choices in state transportation programs increase or decrease equity?

#### Outreach & Communication Methods

- Use plain talk.
- Provide visuals.
- Plan to educate.
- Use culturally appropriate communication.
- Access for people with disabilities.
- Meet communities where they are.

### Step 4. Who benefits? Who is burdened?



In the context of the Highway System Plan, programs describe major WSDOT activities. The programs are grouped in the scenario analysis into five categories: preservation and maintenance, safety, transportation demand management and active transportation, traffic operations, and mobility and economic vitality capital investments.

The equity analysis will summarize relevant research and WSDOT will engage with stakeholders who work with and represent overburdened communities to understand who benefits and who is burdened by different levels of program investments asking questions like:

### Project Need: WSDOT intends the Highway System Plan to:

**Guide WSDOT's corridor, subarea, and network planning** by providing a common language for communicating agency priorities and strategies

**Inform legislative proposals** including how WSDOT intends to achieve legislative policy goals and what levels of program funding are needed to do so

**Facilitate external coordination and alignment** with other state, regional, and local agencies involved in implementation

**The updated Highway System Plan will use a scenario planning approach to explore difficult tradeoffs, set performance expectations, and in collaboration with RTPOs make recommendations on investing transportation funds and stewarding the transportation system**

- What are the immediate direct impacts of different levels of program investment to the populations of focus?
- What unintended consequences could different levels of program investments lead to in the populations of focus?
- What are the local and regional impacts to tribal treaty reserved rights and resources?
- What changes should WSDOT strive to bring about in the populations of focus through different levels of program investments?

## Step 6. How will we hold ourselves accountable?



The Highway System Plan Steering Committee will prioritize recommended strategies and report progress after the plan is complete. The implementation plan will identify who is responsible for carrying out the Highway System Plan's recommendations, by when, and how success will be evaluated.

## Step 5. What strategies or mitigation should we pursue?



Based on the analysis, the Highway System Plan Advisory Committee, Internal Alignment Group, and Steering Committees will identify potential strategies to avoid, minimize, or mitigate disparities and improve equity for overburdened communities. Some of the strategies mentioned for consideration in early equity discussions of the Highway System Plan Steering Committee include: correcting past disparities, improving all modes, increasing connectivity, improving partnerships, and making the best investments in the overall transportation system to solve problems regardless of ownership.

### For more information:

Contact the Highway System Plan team:  
[hsp@wsdot.wa.gov](mailto:hsp@wsdot.wa.gov)

Visit the Highway System Plan webpage at  
<https://wsdot.wa.gov/planning/hsp.htm>

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