

AN EQUITABLE WATER FUTURE Atlanta





ABOUT THE WATER EQUITY TASKFORCE

Water shapes economic growth, the environment, and the social fabric of communities. Ensuring that all people have access to safe, reliable, and affordable drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater systems is the cornerstone of a sustainable and prosperous nation. All have a role to play in forging progress.

The US Water Alliance Water Equity Taskforce is a network of cities working together to develop equitable water policies and practices. Convened by the US Water Alliance—and comprising cross-sector teams in the cities of Atlanta, Georgia; Buffalo, New York; Camden, New Jersey; Cleveland, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—this initiative is advancing understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and promising interventions to promote equitable water management.

Atlanta’s Water Equity Taskforce brings utility managers and community partners to a shared table. The team developed this report as a roadmap to align the resources and capacities of a range of stakeholders to advance equity and inclusion in the ways Atlanta manages its water resources and infrastructure. In this report, the terms “water” and “water management” are used to encompass the structures and facilities operated by the utility for water, wastewater, and stormwater management services.

Atlanta Water Equity Taskforce



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The US Water Alliance is grateful to the Allen H. and Selma W. Berkman Charitable Trust, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and the Turner Foundation for their support of the seven-city Water Equity Taskforce.

The City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management would like to thank the National League of Cities for support in providing research for this project.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Atlanta Water Equity Taskforce began convening regularly and quickly acknowledged that it is critical for the City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management (the Department or DWM), as an anchor institution, to make decisions about water infrastructure investment with an equity lens. The Taskforce identified the need to improve engagement with the community and to find ways to increase employment opportunities within the communities where projects are built.

As part of its work, the Taskforce conducted research, held listening and learning sessions in communities, hosted conversations with local workforce development agencies and educational institutions, and invested time in relationship-building across the traditional utility/advocate boundary. These efforts yielded tremendous results and informed the Taskforce's understanding of equity opportunities and challenges.

Based on these engagements, the team has framed the most immediate and transformative opportunities for policies and practices into four areas of work: Equitable Decision-Making, Affordability, Workforce Development, and Climate Resilience. Recognizing the time required to properly analyze and address each of these areas, the Taskforce's initial focus is on improvements in Equitable Decision-Making and Workforce Development.

The City's issuance of the first publicly offered Environmental Impact Bond (EIB) in US history provides a unique opportunity to leverage funding dedicated to capturing environmental and workforce benefits. The EIB requires the City of Atlanta to implement green infrastructure and resilience projects estimated at \$14 million on the west side, specifically in the Proctor Creek watershed.¹ The projects are to demonstrate both environmental and social outcomes. Specifically, the funding will be used to address flooding and water quality issues, reduce stormwater runoff, and enhance residents' quality of life while creating jobs in the community. The EIB projects provide an opportunity to develop policies and practices that advance water equity.

The Taskforce worked collaboratively throughout 2018 and 2019 to identify water equity issues in Atlanta and develop this Water Equity Roadmap. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the plan to publish the Roadmap in early 2020. Taskforce partners continued to work collaboratively to move the identified priorities forward and reconvened in early 2021 to finalize and publish the Roadmap and rebuild momentum towards action. While pandemic challenges persist, the Taskforce remains committed to the goals of the Roadmap, and recognizes that implementing them will be even more essential in a post-pandemic city.

The work of the Taskforce is consistent with Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms's One Atlanta vision to create a more affordable, resilient, and equitable city through the development of open and inclusive policies and practices in city government. The goal is to equip residents to be successful in contributing to the development of thriving neighborhoods and businesses.

The graphic below depicts the changing model of service delivery in the water industry. Through the Water Equity Taskforce process, DWM recognizes its emerging role in advancing sustainability, social responsibility, and affordability.

Emerging Model Service Provider

Traditional Role

- System (water/wastewater) management and permit compliance
- Efficient, reliable service delivery
- Facilitation of economic development

Traditional + Current Role

- System (water/wastewater) management and permit compliance
- Efficient, reliable service delivery
- Facilitation of economic development
- **Holistic water quality**
- **Environmental stewardship**
- **Stakeholder engagement**

Traditional + Current Role + Emerging Role

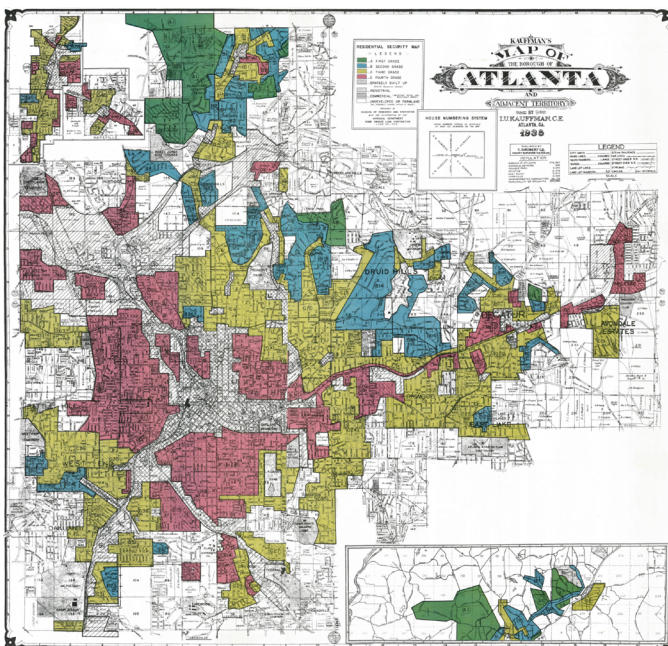
- System (water/wastewater) management and permit compliance
- Efficient, reliable service delivery
- Facilitation of economic development
- Holistic water quality
- Environmental stewardship
- Stakeholder engagement
- **Sustainability**
- **Social responsibility**
- **Affordability**

BACKGROUND

It is not easy to fully understand Atlanta's water resource issues and affordability and equity challenges without understanding the city's geography and its history of oppression of people of color. Unlike many major cities in the US, Atlanta was not built upon a body of water but at the end of the Western & Atlantic Railroad line, giving the city its nickname, Terminus. Standing Peachtree, the Creek Indian village where Peachtree Creek flows into the Chattahoochee River, became part of the story of the displacement of Native Americans that made way for European settlers. The area is currently the site of the intake for the city's drinking water system.

Atlanta's early economy was tied to that of Georgia and the Deep South, an agrarian economy supported by the free labor of enslaved Africans. The Civil War destroyed much of the city's housing stock, and the resulting shortage of affordable housing gave rise to de facto segregation. Most Black people began settling into low-lying areas prone to flooding and sewage overflows, such as Summerhill, which led to disease outbreaks in the late 19th century.

The 1938 Home Owners' Loan Corporation map of Atlanta, National Archives and Records Administration, Mapping Inequality.

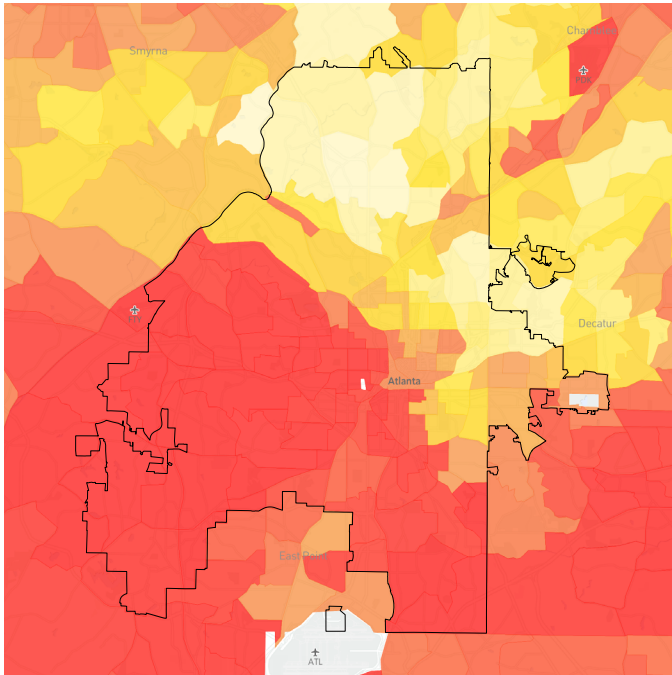


Racial segregation in all elements of city life was later codified through Jim Crow laws. As the city grew in the early 20th century, land use policy set the stage for a century of deepening racial disparity. Structural racism resulted in the "race districts" of the 1920s, redlining in the 1930s and beyond, and a lag in sanitation, education, and other infrastructure investments, while predominantly white areas of the city were modernized. It fueled white flight from integration and the devastation of urban renewal from the 1950s through the 1980s, leaving Black communities with decades of disinvestment, concentrated poverty, crime, pollution, and vast swaths of impervious surfaces contributing to frequent flooding. Access to opportunity was systematically denied through policy and terror.

The seed of the civil rights movement grew from this soil. It transformed the nation, sent ripples of justice around the world, and led to a new era of Black leadership in Atlanta City Hall and a beacon of new Black prosperity in parts of the city. While great progress was made, obstacles remained to fully unraveling institutional racism and repairing inequities that were deeply entrenched by the end of the 20th century.

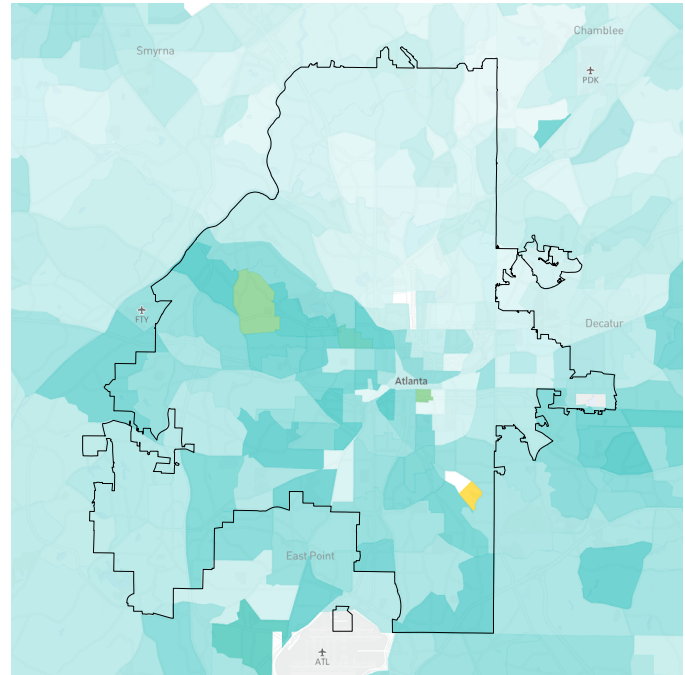
The most recent chapter of Atlanta's history found the same historically overburdened communities struggling with new threats. The recession and foreclosure crisis of the 2000s gutted many southwest Atlanta neighborhoods, and as recovery accelerated, it brought a wave of speculative investment, gentrification, and displacement. Often residents understandably meet new investments in these communities, regardless of their intent, with the assumption that *"This (business, sidewalk, park, trail, garden) is not for me—it's for those replacing me."*

Percent of population that are people of color, 2010



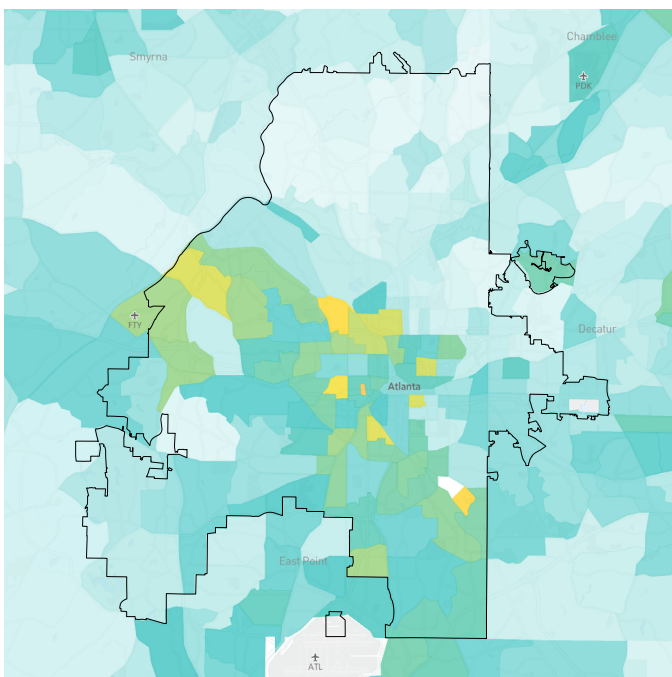
Data source: U.S. Census Bureau; GeoLytics, Inc. | National Equity Atlas (www.nationalequityatlas.org)

Unemployment rate, 2010



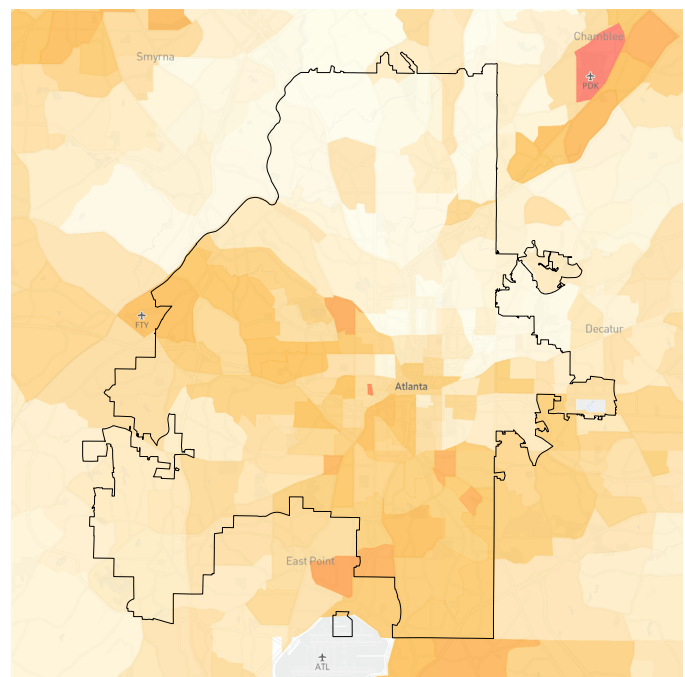
Data source: American Community Survey; GeoLytics, Inc. | National Equity Atlas (www.nationalequityatlas.org)

Percent of population below 100% poverty level, 2010



Data source: American Community Survey; GeoLytics, Inc. | National Equity Atlas (www.nationalequityatlas.org)

Percent of population 25 years and over with less than a HS diploma, 2010



Data source: American Community Survey; GeoLytics, Inc. | National Equity Atlas (www.nationalequityatlas.org)

Today, map after map of Atlanta paints a picture of this legacy. Virtually any indicator of poverty and vulnerability results in a northwest-southeast line bisecting the city and determining life outcomes dependent on zip code. Residents in some of the city's most vulnerable communities—neighborhoods like Adamsville, Center Hill, Grove Park, Sweet Auburn, Oakland City, West End, Lakewood Heights, Adair Park, Vine City, and Mechanicsville (south and west of the line separating the haves vs. have nots)—grapple every day with compounded burdens that reflect past policies and values. Water cost burden, lack of access to jobs, vulnerability to flooding, impaired surface water quality, increased risks from climate change, and the associated health effects are all outcomes DWM and its community partners seek to change.

However, taking action to address one inequity or environmental burden without considering decisions as parts of complex systems inevitably results in unintended consequences. In Atlanta's recent history, Historic Fourth Ward Park is a prime example. Atlanta entered two federal agreements (consent decrees) in 1998 and 1999 to correct Clean Water Act violations. Since then, the City has invested over \$2 billion to address sewer system overflows and improve water quality in local creeks and streams. In 2011, as part of this program, the City completed a \$26 million stormwater retention pond for capacity relief at Historic Fourth Ward Park. This green infrastructure project provides extra capacity to the aging combined sewer system and alleviates flooding, while transforming a barren brownfield into a visually appealing 17-acre greenspace that provides ecosystem restoration and soil remediation. This green infrastructure solution saved \$14 million over the original gray infrastructure alternative. The park and pond adjacent to the Atlanta BeltLine trail became amenities that spurred over \$475 million in economic development, creating over 400 jobs.

From a green infrastructure and economic impact perspective, this award-winning project is a success. But the project catalyzed higher taxes and set off a tsunami of gentrification and displacement for the low- to moderate-income residents nearby, which has led Water Equity Taskforce members to grapple with several questions to inform decision-making for future infrastructure projects:

- How might the outcomes have differed had low- to moderate-income community residents been at the table from the earliest design stages?
- Would the project have been implemented in a different way had community partners committed to affordability mitigations been engaged?
- Would gentrification and displacement have been greatly reduced if the project financing had required that surrounding residents receive explicit benefits, or if policy measures to ensure housing affordability had been pursued ahead of the building of the park?

The Water Equity Taskforce process has brought a diverse group of community and environmental advocates to the table with water utility leadership to imagine a different path for future projects. By focusing its exploration on Equitable Decision Making, Workforce Development, Affordability, and Climate Resilience as priority areas for collaborative action, the Taskforce is seeking that path.

Historic Fourth Ward Park.



Source: "IMG_3459.jpg" by Shawn Taylor is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

PRIORITY AREA 1: EQUITABLE DECISION-MAKING

Challenges

Water utilities, community-based organizations, and nonprofit partners all have perspectives, knowledge, and resources to bring to the work of equitable, resilient, integrated water management. Water and wastewater utilities are responsible for providing safe and clean drinking water, treating wastewater to a high standard, and managing stormwater to provide for public health and safety. Community members bring critical direct knowledge and lived experience of water-related challenges such as flooding, polluted waterways, and affordability. Nonprofit partners have the resources and technical expertise to inform integrated water management. Bringing each unique perspective and voice together helps make decision-making for project planning and implementation more relevant and equitable.

DWM has historically made infrastructure investment decisions, as large government agencies do, based on engineering and technical analysis, budgetary constraints, regulatory mandates, and political will. DWM employs numerous communication tactics to deliver information to the public. While ambitious in their reach, the majority of DWM's approaches historically have been one-way channels intended to convey planned project information and have left little room to receive and implement feedback from the community.

“Focus groups, town-hall meetings, and community surveys are all devices that capture community needs and wishes. However, these exercises fall far short of recognizing a community as a legitimate peer in the design, production, and implementation of those strategies.”

—*Elevating Community Authority in Collective Impact*,
Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2019

Residents of communities have firsthand knowledge of the water challenges in their neighborhoods; therefore, they should be more engaged in delineating and prioritizing problems and identifying solutions and strategies for resiliency. A more open exchange of information and knowledge would provide both citizens and utility officials with an understanding of each neighborhood's most effective infrastructure solutions. A more open exchange might also address ways to avoid negative project outcomes, such as gentrification and displacement, and reveal how community members could participate in economic benefits from employment in the construction and maintenance of projects that affect their neighborhoods.

Promising Practices

Because of the time invested in working together, listening, and trust-building, the Taskforce has begun cultivating a new paradigm for DWM project investments beyond more extensive community outreach and engagement transactions and towards true relationship development and collaborative decision-making. One example of a move in the right direction is the invitation to Taskforce members and representatives of other relevant community groups to hear early concept design presentations on key Environmental Impact Bond projects—and, subsequently, incorporation of their feedback. In addition, the Taskforce intends to seek funding to develop a Racial Equity Action Plan to integrate consideration of racial equity in planning and practice. The practices described here are further steps toward equitable engagement.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Atlanta Watershed Learning Network (AWLN)

Developed by Environmental Community Action Inc. (ECO-Action) and delivered in collaboration with American Rivers, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, The Conservation Fund, Park Pride, Community Improvement Association, and the Metro Atlanta Urban Watershed Institute, AWLN increases the community capacity for engagement with parks and green infrastructure as community assets. This proven leadership development program has educated and activated dozens of residents from many locally challenged watersheds, including Intrenchment and Proctor Creeks. These AWLN graduates are now serving as watershed stewards and teachers themselves. AWLN exemplifies the values of equity, resiliency, and environmental justice in the planning and implementation of parks and green infrastructure.

“Community residents are the ones that live with these challenges. We must be at the table as full participants to address these issues head-on and find sustainable solutions. We need to understand the history of Proctor Creek and the benefits of green infrastructure to make informed decisions about our future.”

—Proctor Creek Resident

“If we think the stormwater and green infrastructure concerns are just about the blue and the green, we have sadly missed the mark. These issues must be people-centered.”

—AWLN Participant

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Intrenchment Creek One Water Management Taskforce

The Intrenchment Creek One Water Management Taskforce began as a cross-sector collaboration of public agencies, community leaders, nonprofit partners, and private developers to plan, design, and restore the healthy hydrological function of the watershed. The Taskforce convened from 2017 to 2020 to develop a plan for equitable, integrated, and complementary water management strategies that build resilience and address persistent flooding and the threat of combined sewer overflows for current and future residents.² Lead partners included the DWM, ECO-Action, American Rivers, and Carter—the private developer for the 70-acre Turner Field redevelopment project at the headwaters of Intrenchment Creek Watershed. The Taskforce has now evolved into the Intrenchment Creek Community Stewardship Council, a community-led effort to address flooding and combined sewer overflows while advancing related and relevant community benefits for the current residents of the neighborhoods. The Council will be a voice for the Intrenchment Creek headwaters neighborhoods in water decision-making and partner with DWM to advance equitable and resilient water infrastructure and Atlanta communities.

Priority Actions

Driving priority actions in equitable decision-making is the belief that in Atlanta, water equity occurs when community residents and watershed protection organizations serve as ongoing, respected partners with DWM in deciding about infrastructure investments. The Environmental Impact Bond (EIB) will serve as a pilot to demonstrate how positive results occur when community residents and organizations take part in the project life cycle, from design to implementation and maintenance. Lessons learned and best practices from the EIB pilot will benefit future projects.

With DWM as the lead, the Atlanta Taskforce is committed to the following actions:

- 1. Support the expansion and funding of community-based organizations** that support green infrastructure, building on a proven model of community leadership development, and expand this approach to additional urban watersheds in other geographic locations. DWM will support community efforts, such as AWLN and the Intrenchment Creek Community Stewardship Council, in identifying funding and educational opportunities to support equitable water management in Atlanta through:
 - Providing and cultivating information exchanges, such as charrettes and stormwater roadshows, on water issues to educate neighbors, agencies, and local leaders on these issues' importance.
 - Supporting stewardship of infrastructure and stormwater on private property.
 - Leveraging matching funds and implementing projects.
 - Amplifying and complementing its reach through broader outreach and engagement efforts.
 - Developing interest in Adopt-A-Stream, Adopt-A-Drain, water-related service projects, Project WET (Water Education for Teachers), and other initiatives that could be a next step for community leaders to engage in watershed stewardship.

- 2. Continue the work of the Water Equity Taskforce** to maintain a structure for ongoing, consistent, and transparent engagement with community residents, partners in equitable water decision-making, and a team to continue roadmap implementation. This Taskforce will invite the Mayor's One Atlanta Office, graduates of the AWLN, and other community leaders to continue implementation measures and help establish processes for equitable decision-making—specifically, engaging and responding to community members for input on prioritization criteria of capital projects with direct impact to the community.

PRIORITY AREA 2: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Challenges

In Atlanta, **28 percent** of the population between 16 and 64 years old did not work in 2015 (higher than the national measure of 25.1 percent), a 3.2 percent increase between 2010 and 2015.³ Lack of access to jobs in Atlanta aligns geographically with communities experiencing environmental injustice, and lack of access to essential resources like high-performing schools and sufficient transit services. Many job centers have located in the suburbs, and those that stay in the city go to the north side, leaving the south side with zero or negative job growth. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities.

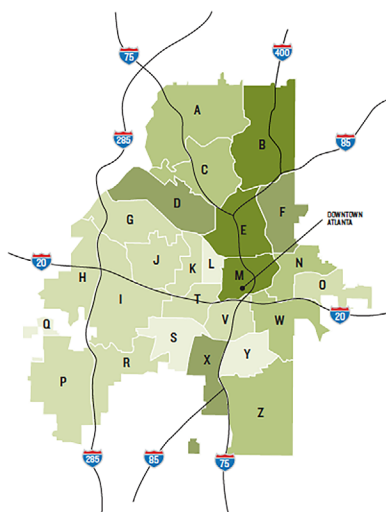
Unemployment is strongly linked with adverse health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, compromised mental health, alcohol use, and suicide. Unemployed people have higher rates of hospitalizations, medication use, and health care visits.⁴ Therefore, leveraging the City’s infrastructure investments to create employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for the residents most in need and most historically affected by our water issues is a priority for the Taskforce.

Like other utilities across the nation, DWM faces significant workforce challenges due to an aging workforce, limited availability of qualified candidates in key positions, and the need to train workers because of technological changes. Of DWM’s more than 1,400 employees, 48 percent will be eligible to retire in the next 10 years, creating a potential “silver tsunami.” With the construction boom in Atlanta, the utility is competing with private businesses to attract skilled labor. The departure of retiring workers is outpacing the availability of replacement workers, resulting in a loss of knowledge and labor to operate and maintain the water system.

Targeted, aggressive recruiting of candidates from Atlanta’s lowest-income communities for competitive-wage jobs in the water sector is a priority. The economic inclusion opportunities provided by DWM’s project investments (external jobs) and its own staff needs (internal jobs) require extensive partnerships and a holistic approach to building a pipeline of residents prepared to seize these opportunities.

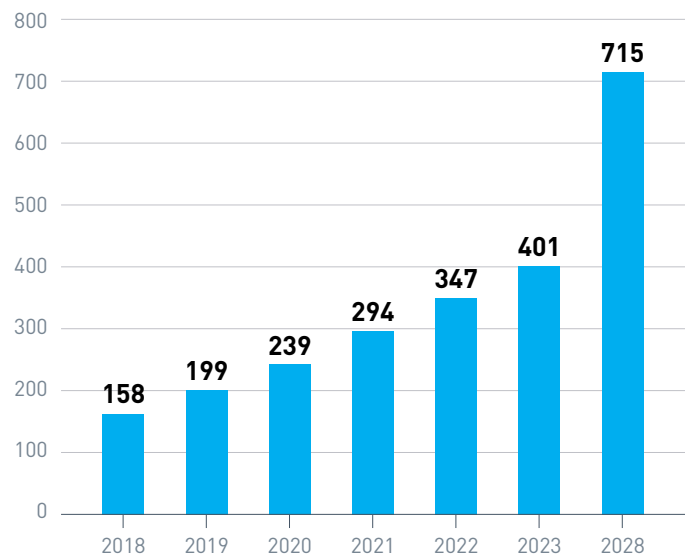
Total Jobs by NPU, 2015

Under 2K 2K-5K 5K-7K 17K-36K 90K-132K



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD).

DWM Workforce Eligible for Retirement by Year



Source: Atlanta Department of Watershed Management.

Promising Practices

Making equity a priority in workforce efforts began with engaging residents through listening sessions, roadshow conversations, and community partners. The overwhelming takeaway from these processes was that the communities' primary concern is creating jobs within their neighborhoods. Therefore, the Taskforce held a workforce convening with local workforce development agencies, community organizations, and educational institutions to discuss the challenges. The principal barriers identified include limited funding and a lack of knowledge about the training needed to enter the water workforce, as well as an understanding of childcare and transportation as universal barriers to employment. The practices described here illustrate efforts already under way to build workforce equity.

PROMISING PRACTICE: **Parks with Purpose**

Using a community-driven equitable development model, The Conservation Fund is partnering with the City of Atlanta, area nonprofits like Park Pride, Eco-Action, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, Proctor Creek Stewardship Council, Greening Youth Foundation, construction contractors, and other community stakeholders to engage residents in the creation and stewardship of new parks and green infrastructure projects in some of the city's historically underserved neighborhoods. These projects are providing community members opportunities to train in construction, masonry, and landscaping, as well as financial literacy, professional development, and resume building. The goal is to ensure that those who have historically been affected by urban flooding and environmental injustices can reap the benefits of newly installed green infrastructure solutions, while building more resilient futures for themselves and their communities.

PROMISING PRACTICE: **Culture-Resilience-Environment-Workforce (CREW)**

Atlanta CREW is a free workforce development program that trains participants to install and maintain green infrastructure that has been designed with a cultural and artistic vision. The program is a partnership of Southface Institute and the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, built to address the need for jobs and addressing specific flooding concerns of Utoy Creek watershed residents. Through classroom and hands-on training, participants learn to install green infrastructure at a community-identified site and gain new skills in green infrastructure installation, operations, and maintenance, and they receive a stipend for four days of participation. The program organizes job fairs and partners with landscaping employers to help increase the likelihood of post-graduation employment.

PROMISING PRACTICE: **World without Waste Trash Trap Network Stream Team**

DWM partnered with Groundwork Atlanta, Georgia STAND-UP, and Osprey Initiative to launch a pilot workforce initiative that employed a local workforce crew to complete scheduled cleanouts of trash traps in Proctor Creek. During the pilot, the crew checked five small trash traps and one large Bandalong trash trap, licensed by Stormwater Systems LLC, on a weekly basis and after major rain events when they were safe to access. These trash traps use the creek's current to capture aquatic litter, which is cleaned out periodically to keep litter from continuing the journey downstream. The pilot included training and hiring local young adults who developed skills that improved their ability to secure full-time, sustainable employment while improving their community. The partnership also involved the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance and the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, and The Coca-Cola Company Trash Trap Network⁵ provided funding for this public/private partnership.

Priority Actions

Driving priority actions for workforce development is the belief that water equity in Atlanta occurs when those burdened by poor and inadequate infrastructure of the past share in the economic, social, and environmental benefits of water system investments.

The Environmental Impact Bond (EIB) has provided an estimated \$14 million to implement green infrastructure and resilience projects on the city's west side, specifically in the Proctor Creek watershed.⁶ Redevelopment of disinvested urban areas, such as the Proctor Creek watershed, can create more impervious surfaces that contribute to stormwater runoff, water quality issues, and flooding during rainfall events. Acres of impervious areas surround the Proctor Creek watershed neighborhoods nestled in the predominantly Black, low-income communities of Vine City, English Avenue, and Historic Westin Heights/Bankhead.⁷

The Taskforce will work to:

- 1. Develop a hyper-local workforce strategy.** DWM, with support from the Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE), will engage internal stakeholders to design a pilot program that leverages the EIB-funded projects to demonstrate a hyper-local workforce strategy that provides training and employment to the people who live in and around the neighborhoods where these projects will be.

From late spring through the end of 2020, PSE conducted a feasibility analysis to understand the entry-level GI jobs the initiative would be training for, as well as larger labor trends in the GI sector that could affect the design of the pilot. In addition, the analysis identified potential training and funding partners and assessed their interests, roles, and responsibilities. Finally, it identified strategic and operational questions needed to design the EIB workforce pilot. The Taskforce drafted a phase two planning structure to continue assessing DWM and the City's current contracting, procurement, and workforce development approach. Results of this pilot program will inform efforts to increase job opportunities for community members as the Department implements other capital improvement projects.

- 2. Develop a strategy to find alternative funding streams** to support greater workforce development. Studies show that for every \$1 million invested in water infrastructure, as many as 15.5 jobs are generated throughout the economy.⁸ Therefore, it is critical to find sustainable funding sources through federal, state, and philanthropic avenues to provide the City with the resources to continue infrastructure investments that lead to job growth.

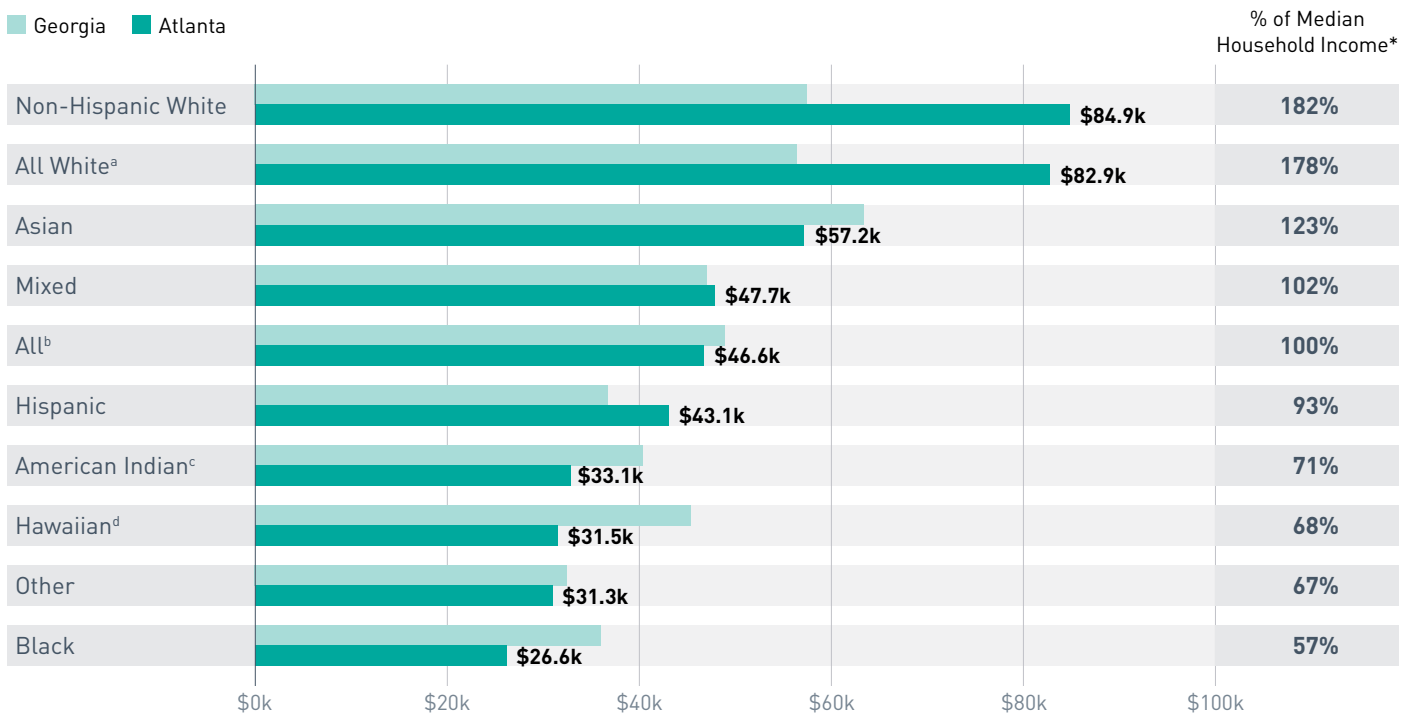
PRIORITY AREA 3: AFFORDABILITY

Challenges

In 1998 and 1999, the City of Atlanta was issued two federal consent decrees, which require the City to improve water quality through capital construction programs and enhance the operation of drinking water and wastewater systems. The City has worked diligently to invest over \$2 billion to comply with its clean water obligations, with another \$1.4 billion in planned expenditures. The City's work has resulted in a 97 percent reduction in sewer overflow volume, but it also contributed to a 250 percent increase in rates over a single decade. In fact, Atlanta's rates are among the highest in the country.⁹ The Department of Watershed Management estimates that infrastructure improvements through 2030 will need an additional investment of \$2.87 billion.

To help stabilize rates and stave off continued rate increases, the City pursued the municipal option sales tax (MOST) in 2004, a revenue source dedicated solely to the water and sewer utility. The MOST has a net of over \$1.2 billion in revenue, allowing the City to spread costs over the daytime population in Atlanta that may not be water and sewer account holders but depend on the water infrastructure. The MOST revenue has allowed the City to continue making infrastructure investments to comply with the federally mandated wastewater system improvements without additional rate increases. Nevertheless, the affordability challenges continue to grow, and the MOST is not a permanent solution to resolving increasing costs and system needs. This is especially true given that effects of the COVID-19 pandemic lowered the expected MOST revenue by 13 percent (\$20 million) for the 2020 fiscal year.

Median Household Income by Race for Households



* % as percentage of median household income of the entire population.

^a including Hispanic whites; ^b entire population; ^c American Indian and Alaska Native; ^d and other Pacific Islander.

Source: "Household Income in Atlanta, Georgia," Statistical Atlas, <https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Georgia/Atlanta/Household-Income#figure/neighborhood>.

The City reviewed its actual billed data for 2017 and determined that its annual average bills to small metered accounts for water and sewer services were \$1,440, while the national average was \$791 a year. During that same period, the average annual median household income (MHI) in Atlanta was \$46,600, consistent with the national average of 3.3 percent of income used to pay for water and wastewater services. Atlanta, however, is a very diverse city with residents all across the economic spectrum. A closer look at the data by race shows that certain segments of the population, Black residents in particular, have the lowest MHI (at \$26,600), and therefore an annual bill of \$1,440 poses a significant burden for those households (with an average of 5.4 percent of income going to support water and wastewater services).

Nearly 40 percent of all Atlanta households have substantial affordability challenges. Almost 14 percent of Atlanta households spend three times what is considered an affordable portion of their annual income on water and sewer services.¹⁰ In Atlanta, this water burden must be viewed in the context of gentrification-fueled increases in housing costs, inefficient housing stock causing a high energy burden, insufficient transit services leading to a high transportation burden, and a confluence of factors contributing to a disproportionately high healthcare burden (for example, the combination of frequent flooding and poor ventilation may increase asthma rates, and insufficient access to parks and healthy foods correlates with higher instances of heart disease). Reducing the water affordability burden, therefore, is a critical priority for the Taskforce.

Promising Practices

The City recognizes the need for assistance to help residents pay for basic housing and utility needs. Current programs below are promising practices that provide some assistance to residents—but the need is greater, and a sustained funding source is necessary to ensure all members of the community have an equal opportunity to thrive.

PROMISING PRACTICE: **Customer Assistance Programs**

DWM has three customer assistance programs: the Care and Conserve Program, the Senior Discount Program, and the Amnesty Program. For single-family, low-income, residential customers who are facing financial hardships, the Care and Conserve Program provides water/sewer bill payment assistance and plumbing repair services and supports conservation measures such as rebates for the installation of high-efficiency toilets and low-flow showerheads and aerators.¹¹ In the 2020 fiscal year, the program provided \$147,000 in bill payment assistance to 223 households and more than \$229,000 for direct plumbing repair services to 32 households through grants issued to local nonprofits. Under the Senior Discount Program, eligible senior citizens receive a 30 percent discount.¹² The Amnesty Program is a seasonal opportunity for customers with outstanding water bills of \$1,000 or more to enroll in a payment plan with DWM, with late fees waived.

PROMISING PRACTICE: **Heritage Owner-Occupied Rehab**

In 2018, the City of Atlanta's economic development authority, Invest Atlanta, launched the Heritage Owner-Occupied Rehab (ORR) program.¹³ The program is offered as a means of maintaining affordable housing in Atlanta communities most vulnerable to gentrification. By providing forgivable loans up to \$30,000 for critical home repairs, ORR helps seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, and other long-time residents improve the health and safety of their homes and avoid displacement. The program also facilitates their qualification for other efficiency programs (both federal and privately funded), helping to reduce other cost burdens.

Priority Actions

Driving priority actions for affordability is the belief that water equity in Atlanta occurs when no Atlantan faces losing their home because of an inability to pay for water.

To understand the magnitude of Atlanta's affordability issues, DWM must better understand the needs of its customers, particularly those who pay utilities as part of their rent and, therefore, do not have established accounts. As a result, DWM does not have sufficient statistical data on household income and age to truly measure its vulnerable communities, and further research is needed to assist the Department in wholly understanding water affordability in the city. With this information, DWM will be in a better position to review its existing assistance programs to determine their impact, and to understand if modifications are needed.

While DWM's current programs provide relief to some customers, there are customers in need of assistance who do not qualify for these programs. Likewise, the resources of the utility are limited by its obligation to meet regulatory requirements, pay the debt associated with historic investments, and maintain the system going forward. Atlanta is not alone in this balancing act, as water utilities nationwide are facing these issues. Therefore, federal assistance is crucial, both from a policy and funding perspective.

To reflect its customer base accurately, DWM will identify and survey multi-family customers who pay their landlords for water usage and will use the data to review existing programs and funding. The Taskforce will also continue to engage in the national affordability discussion to change policies and obtain funding.

The Taskforce will work to:

- 1. Assess customer assistance programs to improve and expand.** DWM will complete an analysis of how effectively its customer assistance programs meet the needs of Atlanta's most vulnerable residents, consider how other cities implement innovative affordability measures, and explore the feasibility of using cellphone tower revenue to create a shutoff prevention fund.
- 2. Engage in federal policy discussions on affordability.** The City has engaged with national water agencies in developing a briefing document to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with recommendations on a new methodology and guidelines for assessing household affordability and community financial capability to replace its current guidance document. The new framework would develop affordability measures that consider more than MHI in a vacuum and also consider the local financial condition, including historical and future trends in a community's economic, demographic, resiliency, and social conditions that affect the community's financial capability.

PRIORITY AREA 4: CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Challenges

Atlanta's climate-related resilience challenges include environmental stresses related to weather extremes and dealing with the effects of aging infrastructure.

Over the past 15 years, northern Georgia has experienced three multi-year droughts followed by years of record rainfall.¹⁴ In 2007, Georgia experienced the worst drought in over 100 years, with damage estimated at over \$1 billion.¹⁵ Metro Atlanta experienced six major floods between 2002 and 2015. In 2015, the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District (Metro Water District) published a Utility Climate Resiliency Study that recognizes how climate variability could adversely affect water availability, water quality, and watershed hydrology.¹⁶ While the City has developed numerous programs to comply with the Metro Water District's water resource management plan, these extreme conditions may necessitate enhanced implementation strategies.

The drought and flood cycles will continue to affect city residents, property owners, and business owners but will affect Atlanta's most vulnerable populations the most. For instance, the effects of flooding are harder to recover from when homeowners do not have the resources to buy flood insurance, repair their homes, install gutters, and take preventive measures. Renters have even fewer options, as they do not control their property and have limited capacity for relocating because of the lack of affordable housing.

Preparing for and adapting to the current and future impacts of climate change requires funding and investment. For example, the City was able to address drought resiliency by developing a 2.4-billion-gallon reservoir that will increase reserve supply from three days to 30 days. Water and sewer revenue paid by residents and businesses for water and wastewater services funded this investment, but addressing resiliency to storms and flooding is more challenging to fund. Management of Atlanta's stormwater system has historically been limited to meeting

regulatory mandates and addressing emergency repairs to maintain roadway drainage. The City receives over 1,300 drainage complaints per year, largely because of neighborhood flooding from clogged or damaged stormwater conveyance systems and the continued development of impervious surfaces. Investing in climate resiliency, specifically in response to intense rainfall conditions, does not have a dedicated funding source.

Water Equity Taskforce member organizations have asserted a vision for stormwater management infrastructure to function as a system that conveys stormwater to reduce flooding, filters it to protect creeks and rivers, and captures it for use or to recharge stream baseflow. Atlanta is already investing in green infrastructure projects that incorporate both natural and engineered elements to create multiple benefits beyond basic stormwater management and in water efficiency programming that has resulted in significant reductions in potable water use. More is required to protect the communities most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.¹⁷

Promising Practices

The City and partner organizations have made numerous commitments in recent years toward building resiliency in the face of climate change. DWM has invested \$320 million toward drought resiliency by developing a former quarry into a reservoir that will serve as the city's largest park. In addition, the Mayor's One Atlanta office is implementing a resilience strategy with significant goals and metrics around researching, preparing for, and slowing down climate change while also addressing equity issues like food access and reducing energy bills for low-income residents. Likewise, the Atlanta City Design and Urban Ecology Framework list equity goals highlighting the needs of vulnerable communities and outline policies to meet these needs through future community development. Examples of other practices under way are highlighted here.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Collaboration with One Atlanta Office of Resilience

The Department of Watershed Management has a strong relationship with the One Atlanta Office of Resilience (OOR), the primary convener of sustainability and equity-based metrics across the city. Continuing this partnership, DWM is currently working closely with OOR on the following initiatives:

- Reporting annually on greenhouse gas emissions.
- LEED building certifications.
- Solar Atlanta.
- Guaranteed Energy Savings Performance Contract.
- Academic research opportunities, such as mapping urban heat islands.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

West Atlanta Watershed Alliance Climate Bootcamp

The West Atlanta Watershed Alliance is convening educational conversations on issues that emerge from climate impacts through K-12 school-based programming and adult community engagement. The goal is to integrate culturally relevant and responsive environmental education and other resources across all educational levels. Water is a major issue on the west side of Atlanta, and the community experiences it from a history of contaminated overflows, displacement, and escalating utility bills. The community is aware that integrated climate change solutions must include managing water, especially stormwater. As a foundation, they share local knowledge and use community science and participatory research to advance the goal. Through developing watershed stewardship councils, coordinating with members of the environmental and conservation nonprofit community and the Department of Watershed Management, and forming metro-wide watershed learning networks, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance is highlighting solutions to issues like availability of affordable quality water, local flooding, greenspace, and restoration of contaminated waterways as high priorities.

Priority Actions

Driving priority climate actions is the belief that water equity in Atlanta occurs when citizens understand the local threats of climate change, have the tools to adapt to changing conditions, and engage in shaping public policy to mitigate the most challenging outcomes.

The Taskforce is committed to the following priority actions:

- 1. Develop a comprehensive stormwater management program funded by a utility fee.** The City of Atlanta is one of few jurisdictions in the metropolitan Atlanta area that does not have a dedicated, sustainable funding source for stormwater management. Similar to over 55 utilities across Georgia and over 2,000 utilities across the country, the City is evaluating the establishment of a stormwater utility that would charge property owners a fee based on the square footage of impervious surface area, the amount of stormwater runoff the property will contribute to the stormwater system. Equity implications of such a fee should be considered in light of 2019 policy recommendations from the Green Infrastructure Taskforce, and the program should provide for property owners to receive a credit for installing stormwater management practices on their property.
- 2. Attain a higher rating in the Community Rating System of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)'s National Flood Insurance Program.** The city's current rating of seven provides customers with a 15 percent discount on flood insurance. Increasing public education, streamlining administrative recordkeeping, and other activities to improve the rating will provide a 20-25 percent discount while increasing education and reducing flood risk for everyone.
- 3. Optimize existing stormwater plans.** Using analytical tools and working with public stakeholders, the City can refine its existing post-development stormwater ordinance by adding overlay districts for additional runoff reduction requirements in areas with higher flood risk. In addition, these same tools can also optimize existing projects identified in watershed improvement plans, consent decree plans, and the infrastructure complaints database and identify the most effective approach to resolving infrastructure issues.

SUMMARY

To advance water equity in Atlanta, the Water Equity Taskforce forged a new level of partnership among community and environmental advocates and water utility leadership in the city. It is the Taskforce’s intention to continue working collaboratively to drive better outcomes for those who live in Atlanta’s historically underserved communities, focusing first in the four key areas that the Taskforce defined: Equitable Decision Making, Workforce Development, Affordability, and Climate Resilience. This Water Equity Roadmap describes the challenges, promising practices, priority actions, and partners to DWM in each of these focus areas, summarized in the table below.

Focus Areas	Challenges	Promising Practices	Priority Actions	Partners to DWM
Equitable Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> History of one-way communications Limited resident access and capacity to engage in decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AWLNL Intrenchment Creek One Water Management Task Force 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Support the expansion and funding of community-based organizations Continue the Water Equity Taskforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Rivers West Atlanta Watershed Alliance Environmental Community Action The Conservation Fund
Workforce Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High unemployment Wave of retirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parks with Purpose Culture-Resilience-Environment-Workforce (CREW) StreamWork 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a hyper-local workforce strategy Develop a strategy to find alternative funding streams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership for Southern Equity The Conservation Fund
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consent decree compliance-driven rate increases Confluence of cost burdens on same residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer assistance programs Heritage Owner-Occupied Repair program 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Assess customer assistance programs to improve and expand Engage in federal policy discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Rivers
Climate Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate infrastructure Changing weather and more extreme storms Education and awareness Sustainable funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Westside Reservoir Atlanta’s green infrastructure strategy WAWA Climate Bootcamp 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Implement a stormwater utility fee Improve rating in the FEMA Community Rating System program Optimize existing stormwater plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Rivers West Atlanta Watershed Alliance

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