URBAN OCEAN LAB

Staying the Course: Local Climate Justice in an Era of Federal Rollbacks

July 2025

Introduction

As climate risks escalate, U.S. coastal cities—home to over 47 million people—are confronting rising seas, stronger storms, and worsening floods. These threats damage infrastructure, displace residents, and disrupt local economies. The risks are not shared equally—nearly 60% of coastal city residents are people of color, compared to 37% nationally. Coastal cities also have higher rates of poverty, unemployment, rent burden, and non-citizenship—all of which compound climate vulnerability.

Communities of color and low-income residents are more likely to live near coasts, in flood zones, or on eroding shorelines, and often lack the resources to recover from extreme events. Climate justice in coastal cities must address both chronic risks like sea level rise and acute threats like hurricanes and storm surges. Many coastal cities are meeting this challenge by directing resources to frontline neighborhoods, elevating community leadership, and building systems that address both environmental and social vulnerability.

Yet this local momentum is unfolding against a backdrop of federal retreat. In its first months, the Trump administration has rolled back key climate and environmental justice programs—terminating the Justice40 Initiative, dismantling the Climate & Economic Justice Screening Tool, shuttering national and regional Environmental Justice offices, and canceling over $1.7 billion in grants aimed at improving resilience, equity, and environmental health.

Despite these rollbacks, cities are stepping up. Through innovative funding models, strategic partnerships, and community-driven planning, they are working to sustain and scale climate justice efforts. This memo presents policy recommendations that cities can leverage in responding to the changing landscape of climate justice, with case examples drawn from interviews with local officials across the U.S. working at the forefront of these challenges:
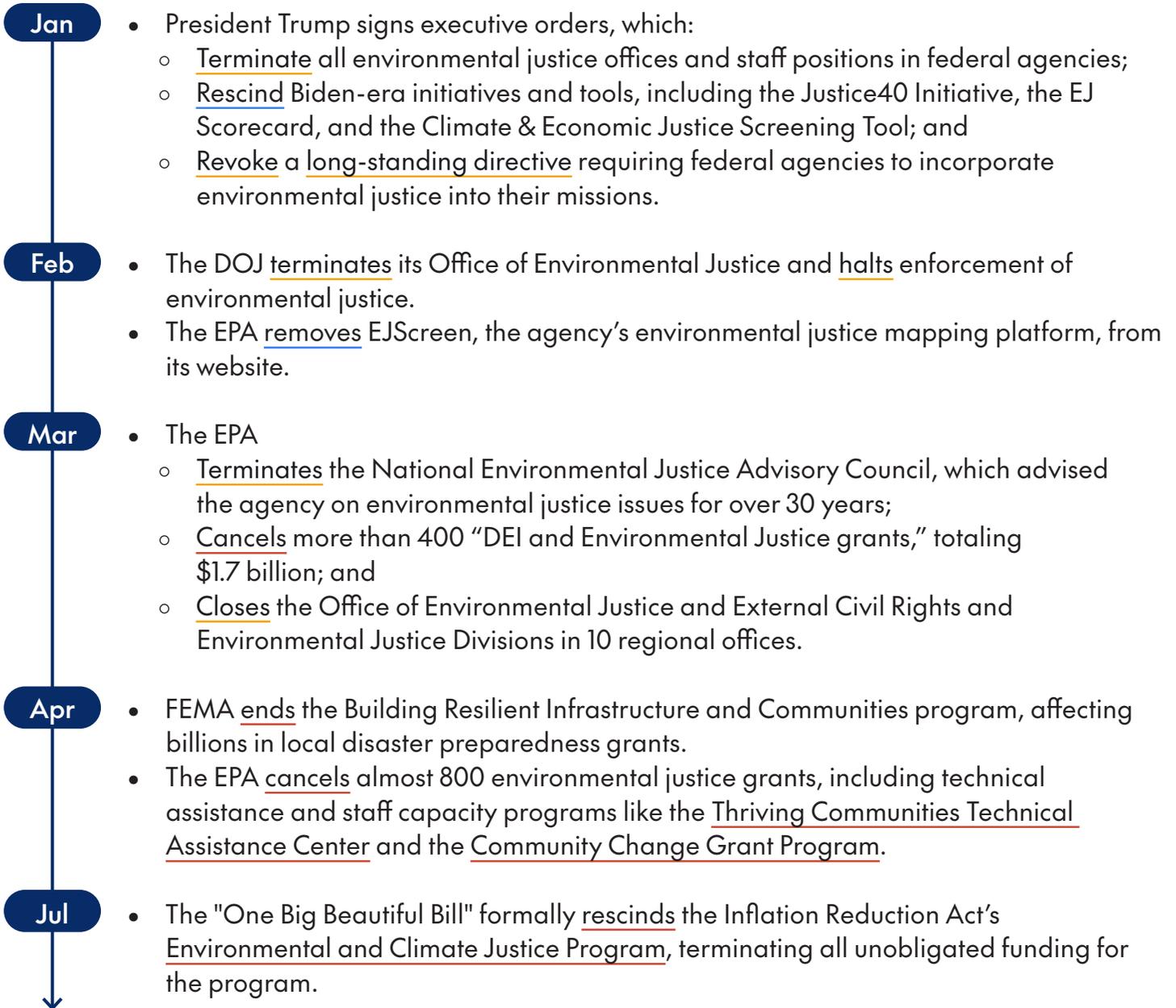
5 Strategies Sustaining Climate Justice Amid Federal Rollbacks

1. Create and sustain dedicated climate justice funds

2. Build and maintain local climate justice data infrastructure

3. Integrate climate justice into city governance

4. Invest in community organizations on the frontlines of climate justice work

5. Create inclusive green workforce development programs

> *Climate justice* in coastal cities means ensuring that the communities most exposed to flooding, sea level rise, and extreme storms, often communities of color and low-income residents, are prioritized in climate adaptation investments, planning, and governance.

Timeline of Federal Rollbacks in Climate Justice

In just six months, the federal government has dismantled core programs that coastal cities relied on to fund resilience infrastructure, map environmental vulnerability, and engage frontline communities. This rollback threatens the ability of local governments to plan for sea level rise, reduce flood risks, and prioritize the most impacted neighborhoods.

Jan
- President Trump signs executive orders, which:
    - Terminate all environmental justice offices and staff positions in federal agencies;
    - Rescind Biden-era initiatives and tools, including the Justice40 Initiative, the EJ Scorecard, and the Climate & Economic Justice Screening Tool; and
    - Revoke a long-standing directive requiring federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into their missions.

Feb
- The DOJ terminates its Office of Environmental Justice and halts enforcement of environmental justice.
- The EPA removes EJScreen, the agency's environmental justice mapping platform, from its website.

Mar
- The EPA
    - Terminates the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, which advised the agency on environmental justice issues for over 30 years;
    - Cancels more than 400 "DEI and Environmental Justice grants," totaling $1.7 billion; and
    - Closes the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights and Environmental Justice Divisions in 10 regional offices.

Apr
- FEMA ends the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, affecting billions in local disaster preparedness grants.
- The EPA cancels almost 800 environmental justice grants, including technical assistance and staff capacity programs like the Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center and the Community Change Grant Program.

Jul
- The "One Big Beautiful Bill" formally rescinds the Inflation Reduction Act's Environmental and Climate Justice Program, terminating all unobligated funding for the program.

> Despite these federal actions, coastal cities are stepping up: launching local funds, building new data tools, and institutionalizing equity to stay on course.

*Institutions dismantled; Data & Tools eliminated; Funding/Program cancelled

Recommendations

1 **Create and sustain dedicated climate justice funds**

The rollback of federal climate justice funding has stalled or derailed many community-led coastal resilience projects. Cities have lost access to key resources that supported partnerships with grassroots organizations, infrastructure upgrades in vulnerable neighborhoods, and emergency preparedness in frontline communities.

To keep climate justice work on track, local governments are developing city-led grant programs, leveraging state resources, and partnering with philanthropies and the private sector. These funding strategies can help ensure that frontline communities remain at the center of climate investment—even without federal support.

A. Establish municipal climate justice funds

- **Seattle's** Environmental Justice Fund, launched in 2018, invests directly in projects that address climate vulnerabilities, environmental health disparities, and economic inequality. The Fund is advised by a community board representing those most affected by climate change. Initially seeded with $250,000 from Seattle's General Fund, the program was later expanded using revenue from the City's Payroll Expense Tax—a progressive tax on high-salary payrolls. By redirecting revenue from wealthy employers toward frontline communities, the Fund creates a sustainable and equitable model for climate investment. Over five years, it has awarded over $2.6 million to community-led organizations. The Fund also supports resilience efforts in areas like the Duwamish Valley, where groundwater intrusion driven by sea level rise is converging with industrial pollution. Seattle's approach demonstrates how municipalities can create locally-governed funds that respond to community needs and build long-term resilience.

- **San Diego's** Climate Equity Fund (CEF) offers a parallel model. Established in 2021, the CEF has allocated $26.4 million to advance infrastructure projects that enhance climate resilience and improve public health. It is financed through a mix of local revenue sources, including utility franchise fees and transportation-related taxes, and is guided by the Climate Equity Index, a tool that identifies neighborhoods most vulnerable to climate impacts.

Advancing climate justice in Seattle's Duwamish Valley

The Duwamish Valley is home to one of Seattle's most diverse populations, and also one of its most climate-vulnerable. Situated along the Duwamish River, this industrialized area faces overlapping risks from sea level rise, extreme heat, and air pollution. Residents have a life expectancy eight years shorter than Seattle's average and are at high risk of displacement. The valley also faces the city's greatest tidal flooding risks, with a high tide event in 2022 affecting over two dozen households.

In response, Seattle launched the Duwamish Valley Program, a place-based initiative rooted in environmental justice and anti-displacement. It includes two core efforts:

- The Duwamish Valley Action Plan, a shared strategy between the City and community focused on health, mobility, housing, jobs, and environmental quality.
- The Duwamish Valley Resilience District, which prioritizes flood risk adaptation while preventing displacement and promoting long-term community stability.

Supported by community-based groups like the Duwamish River Community Coalition, the program emphasizes shared decision-making, equitable community engagement, and sustained city-community collaboration. As climate risks intensify and federal support becomes more uncertain, locally anchored initiatives like this are essential to advancing durable, justice-centered resilience.

Restoration work in the Duwamish Valley. Photo © Paul J. Brown

B. Partner with states, philanthropy, and the private sector

Cities are also working with states and external partners to bridge funding gaps, an approach that's become even more critical amid federal rollbacks. Some state programs, like New York's Environmental Bond Act and California's Proposition 4, include equity mandates that direct funding to disadvantaged communities. Collaborations with philanthropy and the private sector also help unlock new resources, innovative new funding models, expand capacity, and ensure communities take a central role in their own resilience planning.

- **New Orleans** offers a strong example through its partnership with the Greater New Orleans Foundation and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. With funding from Partners for Places, the partnership launched the Climate Action Equity Project, which uses participatory grantmaking to support grassroots climate solutions. Many of these community-led efforts focus on building neighborhood-level resilience to coastal hazards such as recurrent flooding, hurricanes, and coastal land loss in vulnerable neighborhoods along the city's canals and bayous. A community advisory group sets priorities, designs accessible grant applications, and provides outreach and technical support to applicants. In a recent cycle, $53,000 was distributed to local organizations using this model, demonstrating how philanthropy can enable more inclusive, community-driven investment.

- **Oakland** has used public-private collaboration to support both equitable community engagement and infrastructure resilience projects. Through the Rising Seas and Oakland's Infrastructure and Frontline Communities initiative, the City and Port of Oakland are jointly addressing the impacts of sea level rise, storm intensification, and coastal erosion, supported by $4.5 million in state and port funding. A portion of this funding is dedicated for robust community engagement, ensuring the project reflects local priorities like transportation access and public health alongside flood risk.

## ② Build and maintain local climate justice data infrastructure

Recent federal rollbacks have eliminated key data tools, such as the EPA's EJScreen, the Climate and Environmental Justice Screening Tool, and the CDC's Environmental Justice Index, that cities relied on to identify environmental disparities, maintain transparency, and guide equitable investments. Without these tools, many coastal cities face new challenges in targeting resources to communities most impacted by climate change.

In response, cities are investing in localized data systems and forging relationships with states, universities, and nonprofits to ensure continued access to equity-driven insights. By grounding planning in accurate, community-informed data, cities can continue advancing climate justice, even in the absence of federal support.

A. Develop local, equity-focused data tools

- **San Diego's** Climate Equity Index (CEI) is a strong example of how localized data can shape climate investment. Launched in 2019 and updated in 2021, the CEI measures residents' access to opportunity at the census tract level using 41 indicators spanning five categories: environmental risk, public health, socioeconomic status, housing, and mobility. The CEI has been used to prioritize neighborhoods along the coast that are most vulnerable to sea level rise, coastal flooding, and urban heat island exposure.

  The CEI is now embedded in San Diego's planning and budgeting process. It guides implementation of the city's Climate Action Plan and Climate Resilient SD plans, informs infrastructure funding decisions, and supports public outreach and engagement initiatives. By aligning investments with place-based equity metrics, San Diego ensures that communities facing the greatest climate burdens are prioritized for resources and investment.
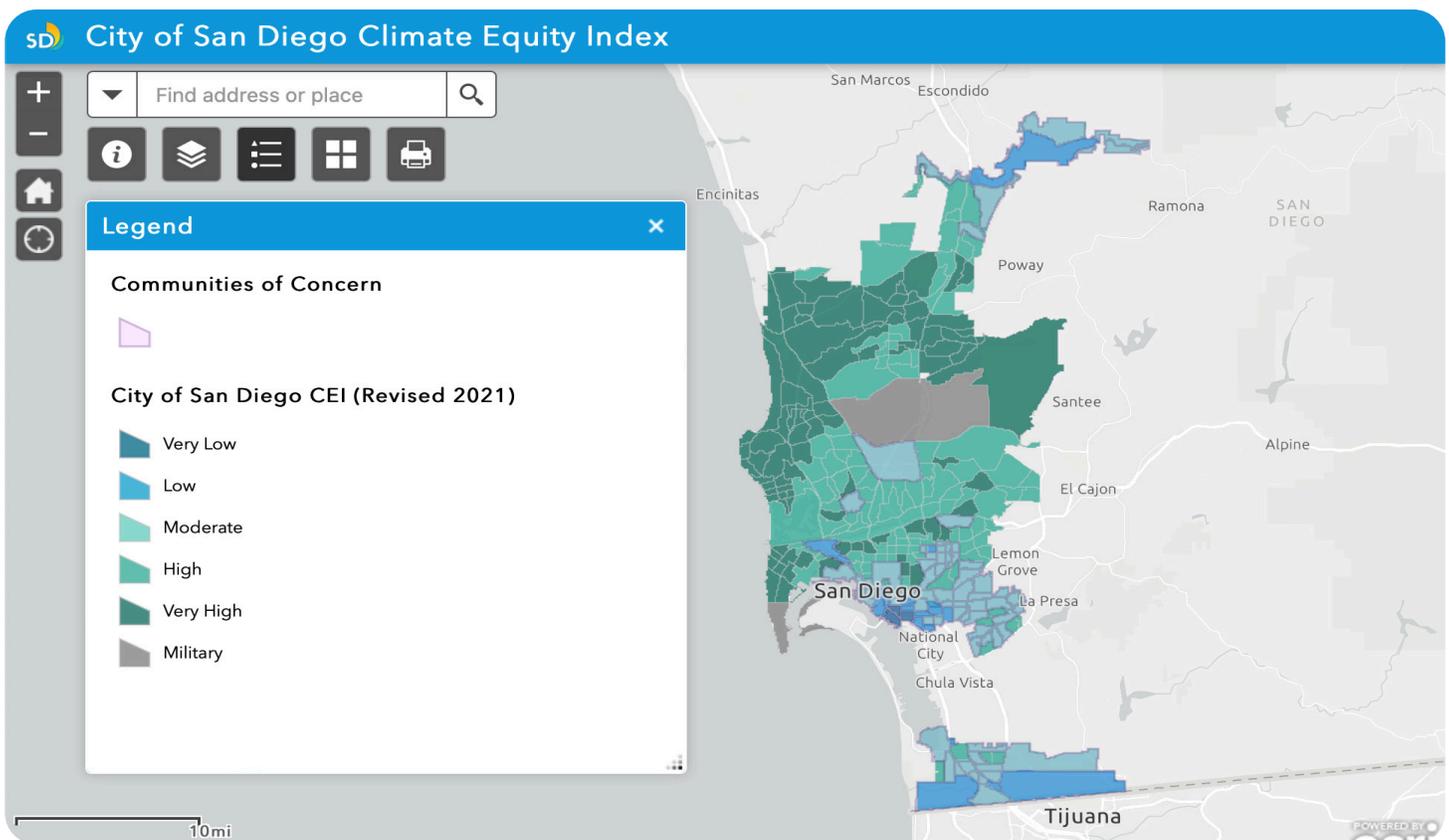

Developed in collaboration with 23 community-based organizations, the CEI draws from local, state and federal datasets—including CalEnviroScreen, census data, and regional heat maps. Source: City of San Diego

- **New York City's** <u>EJNYC Mapping Tool</u> further illustrates how cities can design accessible, community-informed data systems. Developed by the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice in collaboration with the city's Environmental Justice Advisory Board, the tool accompanies the <u>EJNYC Report</u>—the city's first comprehensive environmental justice assessment—and helps make its findings transparent and actionable. It integrates over 100 layers of environmental, health, housing, and infrastructure data. The tool is especially effective in mapping climate risks in flood-prone coastal areas like the Rockaways, the South Bronx waterfront, and parts of Staten Island—where historic disinvestment compounds vulnerabilities from rising sea levels and intensifying storm surges.

  EJNYC is designed to be interactive and user-friendly, empowering both city agencies and residents to better understand local vulnerabilities and make climate-informed planning decisions. It pairs quantitative data with qualitative insights gathered through interviews, focus groups, and public comments. By combining technical metrics with lived experiences, the platform supports more transparent and inclusive decision-making—ensuring that climate adaptation efforts are grounded in the realities faced by those most impacted by climate change.

B. Fill federal data gaps through strong partnerships

Several states have developed their own tools to fill the void left by federal retreat. Platforms like California's <u>CalEnviroScreen</u>, Minnesota's <u>Environmental Justice Map</u>, and Washington's <u>Environmental Health Disparities Map</u> offer rich, localized insights into environmental burdens, health risks, and social vulnerabilities. Universities, nonprofits, and community organizations are maintaining <u>public access</u> to federal environmental justice datasets, building new <u>mapping platforms</u>, and developing analytical tools to support equity-focused planning. By integrating these external resources into local strategies, cities can continue to put communities at the heart of their climate adaptation strategies—even without federal support.
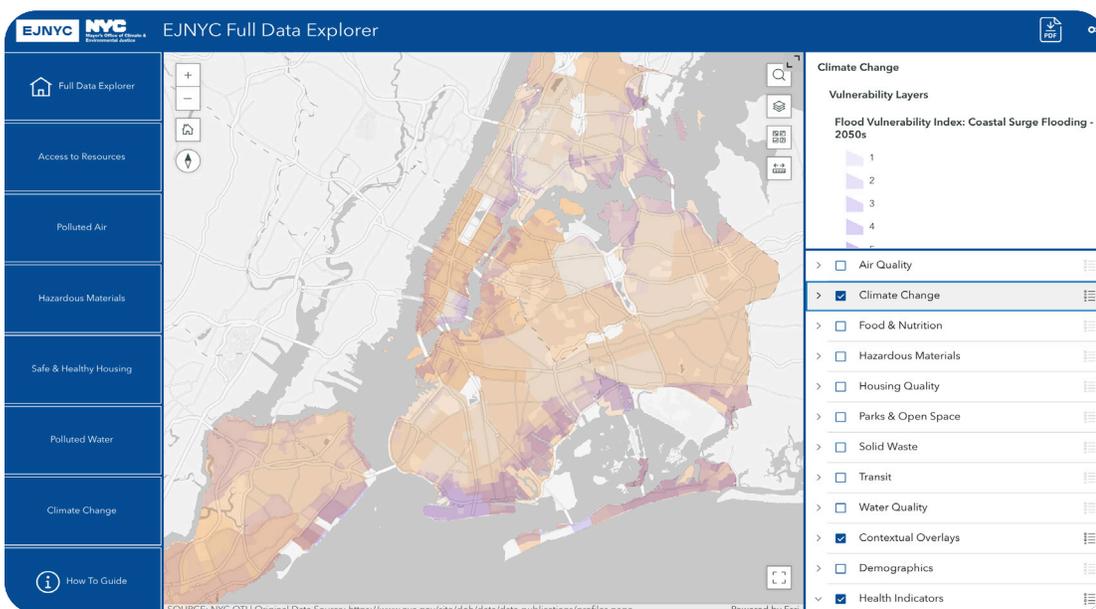
A screenshot of EJNYC's Mapping Tool shows how flooding, heightened by climate change, and health vulnerability compound.

Source: <u>NYC Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice</u>

3 **Integrate climate justice into city governance**

To sustain and scale climate justice efforts, cities are embedding equity into the core of local governance through advisory committees, equity frameworks, and long-term plans. These structures help ensure that justice is not just a singular program or initiative, but a lasting commitment that shapes how cities plan, invest, and engage with communities.

A. Create climate equity plans and committees

- **Providence** offers a powerful model through its partnership with the Racial and Environmental Justice Committee (REJC), a community-based organization of BIPOC and frontline leaders. Rather than relying on traditional public input processes, Providence adopted a co-governance approach, developing its Climate Justice Plan in collaboration with the REJC and guided by the Just Providence Framework, which outlines principles to acknowledge historic harm, build trust, and embed equity across city systems. The Climate Justice Plan also addresses flood risks and sea level rise along the Providence River, where climate hazards intersect with historic disinvestment.

- **New York City** has similarly institutionalized climate justice through formal governance. In 2019, the City established the Environmental Justice Advisory Board (EJAB), composed of experts in environmental justice, public health, and community engagement. EJAB works alongside the Environmental Justice Interagency Working Group to guide implementation of Local Laws 60 and 64, which mandate that all city agencies integrate environmental justice into their operations. In coastal neighborhoods like the Rockaways, Coney Island, and the South Bronx waterfront, these governance structures have helped elevate environmental justice concerns—such as flood vulnerability and disinvestment—into citywide policy discussions. While these groups do not manage adaptation investments directly, their input supports more equitable planning across agencies working on coastal resilience.

A City of Water Day event in New York promoting a climate-resilient and inclusive waterfront. Photo © Jourdan Hercsek, Waterfront Alliance

B. Embed equity and justice across city operations

- **Seattle** has taken this commitment further by codifying its Race and Social Justice Initiative into law in 2023. Led by the Office of Civil Rights, the initiative requires all city departments to address institutional racism and incorporate equity into policies, programs, and budgets. The Racial Equity Toolkit helps staff evaluate whether proposed actions reduce or exacerbate disparities, and every city employee receives training in its use.

  In parallel, Seattle's Equity & Environment Initiative helps guide citywide strategies for embedding environmental justice—particularly in neighborhoods along the Duwamish River and Puget Sound, where sea level rise, legacy pollution, and high social vulnerability intersect. Developed with input from over 1,000 residents and a community steering committee, this work is further supported by the Environmental Justice Committee, a resident-led advisory board that strengthens accountability and deepens relationships between City agencies and frontline communities.

- **Oakland's** 2030 Equitable Climate Action Plan (ECAP), guided by the Department of Race and Equity, includes targeted actions in shoreline neighborhoods threatened by sea level rise and subsidence. The ECAP was developed through extensive community engagement and centers racial equity as a guiding principle. A Racial Equity Indicators Assessment is embedded in each action area of the ECAP, helping identify existing disparities, recommend strategies to address them, and track progress through clear performance indicators.

New Orleans offers a strong example of cross-sector partnerships that support community-led climate initiatives. Photo © Getty Images

④ Invest in community organizations on the frontlines of climate justice work

Community organizations have long been at the forefront of climate justice, advocating for equitable solutions, organizing residents, and leading local resilience efforts. But as federal funding dries up, many of these groups face financial uncertainty just as their work becomes more urgent. Cities can help fill this gap by investing directly in frontline organizations and meaningfully involving them in climate planning, decision-making, and implementation.

- **New Orleans** has built strong partnerships with organizations like the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Healthy Gulf, and the Alliance for Affordable Energy. These groups play a critical role in advancing equitable flood protection, stormwater management, and coastal restoration projects. Through the Climate Action Equity Project, the City has community leaders from every council district help guide implementation of the city's climate action goals. This model shows how cities can institutionalize community leadership and support grassroots organizations already doing the work.

- **Providence's** Green Justice Zones initiative, led by the Racial and Environmental Justice Committee, empowers residents and local organizations to lead planning in neighborhoods along the Providence River, where sea-level rise and heavy rainfall events have exacerbated flooding and infrastructure failures. Rather than bringing the community in at the end of the process, the City supports resident-led cohorts from the beginning, ensuring that goals, timelines, and investments reflect local knowledge and priorities. Green Justice Zones formalize grassroots leadership and build durable partnerships between neighborhoods and city government. They also create a replicable structure that supports community-driven planning across multiple neighborhoods—not just one-time engagements.

Marsh grass planting in New Orleans. Photo © Healthy Gulf

⑤ Create inclusive green workforce development programs

As cities scale up investments in resilient infrastructure, nature-based solutions, and clean energy, the demand for a trained workforce is growing. Yet at the same time, national service programs like AmeriCorps are facing steep cuts, jeopardizing efforts to create equitable pipelines into green jobs. Cities can build workforce programs that prioritize frontline communities, connect residents to long-term career pathways, and ensure that climate investments also generate economic opportunity.

- **Cleveland's** Fresh Water Institute, a Cuyahoga County program, introduces students to the challenges of lakefront planning and infrastructure along Lake Erie, linking freshwater systems to resilience careers. The program teaches local youth about freshwater adaptation challenges similar to those facing oceanfront cities. The city's urban forestry summer employment program engages young people in green infrastructure work.

  In addition, Cleveland's workforce development board partners with employers and regional equity initiatives to provide on-ramps to careers in environmental fields. Programs offer high school training programs and employer-led training opportunities in environmental and infrastructure sectors. This comprehensive approach helps ensure that climate investments support local workers and build long-term opportunity in communities that have historically been left out of public infrastructure spending.

- **New Orleans** supports a green workforce through initiatives like Thrive New Orleans, LA Green Corps, and Ground CREW. These programs provide job skills, training, mentorship, and direct employment for BIPOC and disadvantaged residents. The Ground CREW program, in particular, employs young adults in neighborhood-scale resilience projects, from stormwater management to green space development. Many of these programs prepare residents for careers in blue-green infrastructure projects tied to flood protection, coastal restoration, and wetland preservation. However, these efforts rely in part on federal funding and will need sustained local investment as federal cuts impact their operations.

  To help strengthen workforce development, the city is also leveraging its JPMorgan AdvancingCities grant, which expands workforce training in the water management sector—further aligning climate adaptation needs with economic development goals. Together, these programs help build a skilled, locally rooted workforce ready to lead on resilience—and ensure that climate justice includes economic justice.

Conclusion

In the face of sweeping federal rollbacks, coastal cities are proving that local leadership on climate justice is not only possible—it is essential. By developing innovative funding strategies, building localized data systems, institutionalizing equity in governance, investing in frontline organizations, and growing inclusive green workforce pipelines, cities are charting a resilient, community-driven path forward.

This moment demands bold action. While federal support remains uncertain, cities have the tools—and the imperative—to continue advancing climate justice from the ground up. By learning from one another's successes and staying rooted in community leadership, coastal cities can protect the gains made under initiatives like Justice40 and ensure that the work of building a just, climate resilient future continues—no matter who is in the White House.

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