

Case Study: Building Equitable Communities

GBA+ Community Planning in
Burnaby, BC



Introduction to the pilot project

In 2023, the City of Burnaby began a process to create three community plans. Edmonds and Royal Oak had existing community plans dating from the 1990s that needed updates, while Cascade Heights had yet to go through a community plan process. These planning documents presented an opportunity to expand on an underlying desire for equity and resilience at the City.

Like many urban settings in the region, the three communities are all experiencing tremendous growth and change. As one of four designated Town Centres in Burnaby, Edmonds is a culturally diverse area with many different interests and ideas represented in its residents. Royal Oak includes a Skytrain station and as a result has major potential for transit-oriented development. Cascade Heights is a smaller community situated next to Burnaby Hospital - a facility currently undergoing redevelopment - presenting an opportunity to envision what the future might look like in the area.

Around this time, a delegation from YWCA Metro Vancouver's City Shift initiative along with REACH-Cities (a health research program based at Simon Fraser University) presented to the City of Burnaby Social Planning Committee. The delegation requested that the City broaden its consideration of equity in city processes, and proposed the use of Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) as a more formalized method to evaluate systemic inequities within programs, policies, and initiatives.

In response, on June 19, 2023, Council directed staff to “run a pilot project within the Edmonds Town Centre Community Plan review that utilizes a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach, with the goal of prioritizing social equity and further mitigating the impacts of race, immigration status, socio-economic status, gender, and ability as the City develops a new Edmonds Town Centre Community Plan”. As the three community planning processes were being undertaken at the same time, the pilot was subsequently expanded to include Royal Oak and Cascade Heights as well.

Supporting the pilot was an informal Advisory Group consisting of the Civic Innovation Lab, a non-profit society co-founded by the City of Burnaby and Simon Fraser University to bring applied research to real-world challenges, YWCA City Shift, and REACH-Cities. At the start of the project, the Advisory Group helped support a series of conversations with the Burnaby project team, where staff received training and education about GBA+ approaches and reviewed shared resources.

Through the application of GBA+ and with the support of the Advisory Group, staff had an opportunity to learn and test an approach to make equity-based work more explicit within community planning.

“Burnaby has a high rate of change, and growth is coming whether we want it or not,” shared Rebekah Mahaffey, Executive Director of the Civic Innovation Lab. “Community-based planning that works from an equity perspective is one of the more compassionate tools that municipalities have that can enrich our communities.”



Project goals

The overarching goals for the three community plans were to *“manage the growth of Edmonds Town Centre, Royal Oak, and Cascade Heights over the next several decades and account for shifting community trends, changes, and priorities.”*

When Council directed the addition of the GBA+ lens, the goals of the pilot initially focused on the consultation and engagement process. The project team looked at how to be more inclusive in how they engaged communities, reaching out to as many community members as possible. However, after the first phase of engagement, as the project team and Advisory Group continued to discuss and learn about the GBA+ approach, goals evolved into examining other aspects of the planning process that GBA+ could apply to such as policy directions and land use decisions. This guide, however, is intended to support the community-facing equity work of municipalities.

The difference from business as usual:

Results of the pilot

How the GBA+ pilot shaped consultation

Public consultation focused on expanding the strategies used to reach out to community members. The project team coordinated with Social Planning to create a much wider distribution list to get the word out about open houses and to reach out to a wider variety of community groups than have typically been involved in past planning exercises. Close to 50,000 postcard mailouts were distributed to area residents, business owners, and property owners. In addition, over 70 referral letters were distributed to x^wməθk^wəy^əm (Musqueam), Sk^wx^wú7mesh (Squamish), sə^lilwə^tə^t (Tsleil-Waututh), and k^wik^wə^ləm (Kwikwetlem) Nations, and a variety of community partners, religious groups, and non-profit organizations in the area.

Overall, four open houses were held, engaging roughly 350 people. Open houses and meetings were held in locations and at times that supported increased access, such as in the evening in public spaces like community centres. Throughout the project, opportunities were available to meet with staff to discuss the project and answer questions. The staff team remained flexible to connect with members of the public in the way they wished, using in-person and virtual methods (both phone conversations and written correspondence.)

After receiving requests from community members for Mandarin translation, a staff member joined the open house team to provide Mandarin language translation.

Engagement materials such as web content and online surveys were also made available in various languages. The experiment with providing language translation throughout the engagement process proved a success of the pilot. Moving forward, Burnaby is in the process of standardizing language translation across the City, offering more languages for people to participate in.

“GBA+ pushed us to engage in innovative ways, to reach members of the public in ways that people don’t expect,” shared Andrew Yu, a Burnaby planner on the project. In one case, many Cascade Heights residents were interested in the project and staff met with a group of neighbours at Avondale Park. In other cases, staff presented as guests at regular meetings for various community groups such as youth groups and seniors clubs.

One note of caution - while meeting with the public in venues where they are most comfortable can increase engagement access, thought should be given to ensuring that the same levels of respect and safety for City staff members are present both inside and outside of civic facilities. Staff should consider contingency plans and strategies for defusing situations when residents are speaking about issues they are passionate about, and this passion crosses the line into verbal abuse.

Gathering and analysing demographic information

For each of the community plans, an online survey as well as a short-form comment section were made available in multiple languages, and over 1000 survey responses were received. The survey was expanded to include demographic information



from participants, including age, household income, housing tenure (rent or own), and identity factors such as persons with disabilities, racialized, Indigenous, and newcomers to Canada. Including this expanded set of demographic questions in surveys was an important practice for Burnaby, and allowed the project team to better understand how representative the engagement activities were for the different communities.

“Observing trends in demographic data and seeing the high numbers of seniors who attended engagement events highlighted the importance of considering home designs and options to accommodate people staying in these neighbourhoods they had lived in for their entire lives,” reported one of the planners on the project.

This is also not an exhaustive guide. Creating equitable cities might include learning and growth at the individual and staff levels, or reviewing internal practices and policies before making external decisions. This guide, however, is intended to support the community-facing equity work of municipalities.

Connecting consultation findings to policy directions

Information, concerns, and hopes gathered from particular groups were considered by staff. Then, drawing on the GBA+ tools they learned, they kept these in mind while developing policy directions and working through trade-offs. Drawing on the GBA+ process provided the project team with space to deepen and enhance the work of connecting what was heard from community into the analytic phases of the planning work.



For example, in Edmonds, residents and business owners expressed concerns that redevelopment may force small businesses to close. These businesses were important to the community: often family-run, with ties to specific cultural communities. In response, staff developed policy guidance to work with potential future developers during the redevelopment process to scope opportunities for establishing smaller, more affordable and/or more context-appropriate retail spaces. The project team also created more mixed-use, flexible land use plans that support smaller/family businesses in quieter neighbourhoods. As one project team member shared, “We can’t make developers provide any one type of retail use or space without a more concrete policy. But now at least the policy direction is there to encourage more options and enable us to work more closely with developers to explore different opportunities.”

Another opportunity came from the Cascade Heights community planning process. Residents expressed a desire for more commercial opportunities along Sunset Street (near the Burnaby Hospital) especially medical and health and wellness services, as well as restaurants, cafes, and small grocery stores. In response to this feedback, planning staff incorporated policy guidance to continue building partnerships with Fraser Health Authority and other community partners as future redevelopment occurs throughout the neighbourhood to explore these commercial options.

Building equity into the shape of project reporting

The project team used a new format in project reporting, providing examples of actions and directions that advanced GBA+ and equity considerations through both the consultation process and through policy directions that were incorporated into the community plans (see examples in Figures 1 and 2, below.) This format presented a different way to organize information, attempting to more explicitly showcase the link between equity intention and tangible implementation. Continuing to fine-tune this approach, with additional details around what was heard from the community, how the plan looks different as a result, and how this helps to mitigate negative impacts of systemic inequities would be stages to consider in the future in projects using GBA+.



Action or engagement method implemented	GBA+ and equity considerations
Facilitating language translation where possible	In recognition of Burnaby’s culturally diverse population, engagement materials (e.g. web content, online surveys) were made available in various languages. Requests for particular staff language speakers to be present at the open house events were accommodated upon request, to the best of the project team’s ability.
Providing flexibility on how to provide feedback and input	The project team was flexible on how feedback and input could be received during the community planning process. This allowed community members to choose from a variety of ways (e.g. in-person, virtual, over the phone, written) to provide their input and feedback on the engagement materials.

Figure 1. Example of report format connecting engagement activities with GBA+ and equity considerations (City of Burnaby, 2024).

Policy direction or strategy included	GBA+ and equity considerations
Rental housing renewal	Although present in the other communities as well, Edmonds is home to a large existing purpose-built rental housing stock. As redevelopment occurs in the future, the Edmonds Plan highlights the importance of housing policies such as the Tenant Assistance Policy (TAP) and rental replacement regulations in the Zoning Bylaw in mitigating the impacts of tenant displacement due to redevelopment and providing options for residents to stay in their communities.
“Rental Only” Land Use Designation	Several areas are designated in the Edmonds Plan as “Rental Only” sites, meaning that only market or non-market rental housing tenures would be supported through future development. This “Rental Only” designation is intended to encourage rental housing development projects in strategic areas, including lands that are currently publicly-owned, proximate to transit and/or lands where the city supports additional housing options for specific population groups (e.g. seniors housing). The Edmonds Plan, once adopted, will be the first community plan in Burnaby to designate “Rental Only” sites as part of its land use framework, and will support more equitable housing choices in the community.

Figure 2. Example of report format connecting policy directions and strategies with GBA+ and equity considerations in the Edmonds Community Plan (City of Burnaby, 2024).

In sum, as with any pilot process, there is opportunity for Burnaby to further expand integration of equity into policy and technical planning, and to communicate the steps of this process to the public. The refreshed community plans will have more nuanced details and attention to neighbourhood connections, and while the GBA+ pilot process certainly contributed to this, some of this also reflects general contemporary trends in land use planning (such as active transportation, access to green space, and mixed-use zoning).

Reflections and lessons

Learned from working with GBA+

Step boldly into this work, and be prepared to make mistakes

Doing equity work is challenging. “Sometimes it is only once you step into doing the work that you realize all the different questions you might have to wade through,” shared Dr. Meghan Winters, lead of REACH-Cities. “This kind of work requires constant learning, and it’s important that teams and leaders acknowledge and allow for this.” The City of Burnaby has taken a big step with the pilot and has learned through the process.

The presence of the informal Advisory Group for the planning project was a new model for Burnaby, and this helped offer ideas that could address the challenges and questions that the project team had throughout the process, assisting them to learn as they went.

Recognize that working differently takes additional resources

The GBA+ pilot was undertaken with the support of a non-profit organization and a research team. This was a unique circumstance and is not anticipated to be in place for future work. As such, the resources needed to integrate a GBA+ approach should be thoughtfully identified. This may include extra staff, additional budget for translation and other access support needs, costs associated with more diverse formats of open houses and community gatherings, and flexible staffing schedules (e.g. to attend community meetings outside of regular work hours).

Expand the definition of “planning” work away from the desk

Develop working norms that include leaving the office to connect with community as an accepted and encouraged part of the planning role. “We often don’t enable or reward technical planners for developing relationships at an interpersonal level. Part of this is to protect them from lobbying, but part of it is linked to organizational norms that put the development of social capital only in certain roles,” reflected Rebekah Mahaffey. Give planners permission to leave the office - and not just for the open house, but to go to seniors’ luncheons, neighbourhood meetings, and other community gatherings to listen to the issues and priorities of those that make up the city.

Look for and support internal champions that can help push equity work forward

Working in a bureaucracy can sometimes feel rigid, with prescribed roles and limitations. However, there are often small intervention points that can be used to initiate a transformation. Having internal champions associated with a new equity project can help identify and unlock these intervention points. Find staff members that are excited about the project’s potential, and who will look for openings and work towards finding a “yes” even when faced with bureaucratic or systemic challenges. Ensure these champions are resourced adequately, in terms of both staffing and budgeting support. Being a champion can’t be a “side of the desk” role.

Aim high, but recognize social inequities are complex

Planning is often looked at as a way to solve larger systemic issues, such as poverty. While planning tools can have a strong influence, planners can't single-handedly address the complexity that accompanies inequities. It's important to recognize that using an equity tool like GBA+ is a more responsible way of doing planning, but it will not alone solve all social challenges. Additional work is needed to address other structural causes of inequities.

Consider planning detail and scale when matching equity approaches with a project

Several respondents connected to the project reflected that the ongoing Burnaby 2050 Official Community Plan (OCP) Update process might have been a better starting place for an initial pilot. An OCP acts as a city-wide foundation to build from, ensuring equity is embedded in high-level strategic visioning and policy. Community Plans are more detailed and largely focused on contextual, neighbourhood-specific technical planning aspects. It was challenging for staff to determine how to apply GBA+ in this context, without the overarching directive that an OCP or similar policy would provide. Municipalities should spend some time considering their specific planning needs and where they are at in their equity journey before selecting a particular approach such as GBA+ and matching it with a particular planning process.

Identify particular goals or targets at the beginning

When Council passed the resolution, the goals and intentions of the pilot were high-level. Creating a step between the direction to do the pilot, and actually doing it, would have helped to clarify the process. A good start might have been getting the project team to sit down together for a conversation around specific goals of the pilot and how to make this a success. Following this, staff could produce a Council report outlining what Burnaby wanted to do with the project, and how they were going to do it. GBA+ is diverse, and it can involve so many considerations; getting clarity on specific priorities or goals can help to focus project efforts.

Learn more — and share — about who is in the community

Across all city engagement activities, consider having more robust demographic data collected as part of the process. This is incredibly important for undertaking disaggregated analysis (breaking down larger datasets into more detailed categories for analysis, such as gender, ethnicity, age, income, etc., can reveal inequalities that may not show up in higher-level data summaries). In addition, Dr. Meghan Winters commented on the value of publicly available community context information: “Publishing community demographics can help make it clear who we are engaging and planning for. This can be useful for many groups doing work in Burnaby, such as non-profits and residents - it can help them to better understand why Burnaby undertakes certain policy approaches.”

Harness the power of community delegations

The pilot arose in large part due to a community delegation that came forward with a specific request, and a timeline that coincided with work the City was already planning to do. It was a great example of the role that community groups can play in contributing to a more just and equitable city. Municipalities can benefit from seeking out the guidance and expertise of local organizations when engaging in equity work, drawing on their deeper connections to frontline communities and years of experience tackling complex challenges such as inequity and discrimination.



Next steps

Staff provided updates on the project at regular check-ins with the Planning and Development Committee and Burnaby Council. In addition, reports at the end of each public consultation phase spoke to how GBA+ was incorporated into the work. Ideas were documented as part of this process, providing a record for learning and future iterations.

The GBA+ pilot was successful in introducing the approach to a wider public audience and testing out its application to actual plans that the City was developing. The process supported staff to begin to think about how equity can be tangibly incorporated into policy directions on topics that impact the wider community, such as housing, transportation, access to public space, and services.

“Social equity as part of the community planning process was already a goal of ours, but the GBA+ pilot offered us a way to label and identify some of these efforts in a more structured way, and perhaps expand upon them under a GBA+ lens,” reflected Andrew Yu.

Staff are currently working on a Council report considering options to continue or expand the application of a GBA+ approach.

Call to Action

Equity is something we should systematically have as part of forming policy - not just in planning, but in all departments. Equity work doesn't specifically have to be with the GBA+ tool, but staff and Council should put some time into determining the first steps and get started. Treat initial projects or programs as a prototype to learn from and improve on. By taking the leap into action and incorporating time for reflection and learning, we can start to transform our cities into more equitable and just places.

Many resources can assist with this journey, including looking at other Canadian cities that use GBA+. Some of these are included below, for reference.

- **GBA+ & Equity Toolkit Story Document - Zoning Bylaw Renewal.** (2021). City of Edmonton
- **A Culturally Relevant Gender-Based Analysis (CRGBA) Starter Kit.** (2020). Native Women's Association of Canada.

- **Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+): A Report on GBA Plus in British Columbia and Canada** (2022). REACH-Cities.
- **Introduction to GBA Plus - free online course.** (2022). Women and Gender Equality Canada.
- **Municipal Equity Kickstart Guide.** (2023). YWCA City Shift.

Letter from the City Shift and REACH Cities

We recognize that not everyone has had a voice in how our cities are shaped — and this must change if we want to foster prosperous communities that empower all residents to thrive.

Cities are feeling the pressure of competing priorities and having to do more with less. By recognizing the diverse circumstances and needs of residents, cities can harness equity to meet the complexity of today's challenges and plan for an uncertain future.

We deeply appreciate the City of Burnaby's openness to sharing their progress in implementing a GBA Plus pilot. This case study offers insights from staff on effective strategies and areas of improvement, as well as practical tips for integrating GBA Plus into planning processes and policy decisions.

YWCA City Shift and SFU REACH-Cities urge all municipalities in Metro Vancouver to commit to supporting ongoing equity initiatives and nurture emerging ones. Tools like GBA Plus can help local governments dismantle systemic barriers and enhance quality of life for all residents.

We hope that you find this resource helpful, and we are here to support you in your journey.

To learn more about YWCA City Shift, visit:

ywcavan.org/cityshift

To learn more about REACH Cities, visit:

sfu.ca/reach-cities

Land acknowledgment

We respectfully acknowledge that our main office and many of our programs are located on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, and that our work across British Columbia spans the territories of more than 200 First Nations. We also acknowledge the First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples who live in our communities.

YWCA Metro Vancouver is committed to truth and reconciliation. This includes understanding the truth and impact of our shared colonial history, making positive changes within our organization and taking actions that advance safety, justice and equity for Indigenous peoples.

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