

ISSUE BRIEF

GREEN NEIGHBORHOODS

ADVANCING STRATEGIES THAT CREATE STRONG, JUST, AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

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“We all share one planet and are one humanity; there is no escaping this reality.”

WANGARI MAATHAI, KENYAN ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICAL ACTIVIST AND NOBEL LAUREATE.



Pop-up event commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Watts Riots

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NRDC's Green Neighborhood Initiative: Putting a face on sustainability

"We need to continue improving the conditions of distressed communities, learning from the past to be innovative in how we do it . . . Our shared prosperity depends on it."

—Shelley Poticha, Director NRDC Healthy People & Thriving Communities Program

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the nation's leading environmental organization, is working to transform the way urban revitalization is conducted in communities across America. We believe that every person should be able to live in a community that is healthy, attractive, and sustainable.

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East Ferry neighborhood, Newark, NJ

THE GREEN NEIGHBORHOODS INITIATIVE

NRDC's Green Neighborhoods Initiative serves as the center of community-based technical assistance focusing on advancing strategies that create strong, just, and resilient communities. We have an explicit focus on partnering with low-income and underserved communities in order to put in place the building blocks of better living—high-quality, environmentally sound, and affordable transportation, energy, food, and housing.

Our guiding values of sustainability and equity align closely with NRDC's efforts to meet the challenges of climate change. By building local capacity, harmonizing policy and funding with community visions, and making local voices for resiliency heard, Green Neighborhoods helps identify and implement place-based solutions to climate change.

WHAT ARE GREEN NEIGHBORHOODS, AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

The Green Neighborhoods project is an initiative driven by experts and leaders in urban planning, sustainable community development, and smart growth. We support neighborhoods to become environmentally exemplary through sustainable and equitable neighborhood-scale revitalization. As the center of technical assistance for NRDC's Resilient Communities division, Green Neighborhoods works with communities of color to identify, fund, and implement sustainable and equitable new development.

Communities of color and those with high concentrations of poverty are disproportionately subject to harmful environmental impacts from toxic chemicals, air pollution, contaminated water, and noise pollution. These neighborhood impacts will only increase with climate change.

Creating change at the neighborhood level allows us to pilot new policy changes locally.

HOW WE WORK

With partners in multiple cities, including New York, Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles, we create trust, buy-in, and ownership within communities to move their vision forward to implementation. We integrate energy efficiency and clean energy generation, transportation and land use, stormwater and urban resiliency, and food and food waste. Green Neighborhoods institutionalizes these four pillars within neighborhood and city plans while building support for climate action and equitable development. By doing so, we show policy makers, market actors, and citizens that using sustainable, inclusive, and healthy principles to improve the quality of life in communities saves money, generates jobs, improves health, and makes significant contributions to climate change mitigation and resiliency.

LEED FOR NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The Green Neighborhoods project has been working to support models of [homegrown revitalization](#) in places across the country for many years. In 2009, NRDC partnered with the Congress for the New Urbanism and the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) to launch the groundbreaking [LEED for Neighborhood Development](#), or LEED-ND.

LEED-ND is a rigorous certification—a national standard for green development—that at its core is a system of measurements for evaluating and rewarding smart, green development at the neighborhood scale. The Green Neighborhoods team has developed a tool, called LEED-ND+, that incorporates the sustainability metrics in LEED-ND with additional standards on health, equity, and climate resilience to better align comprehensive plans and zoning codes with community and citywide sustainability goals. This tool helps neighborhoods examine their community in a holistic manner and articulate and quantify what sustainability at the local scale looks like.

WHAT WE MEASURE MATTERS

The principles behind Green Neighborhoods and the metrics outlined in the [LEED-ND+](#) tool can help guide transformative change in neighborhoods. Focusing measurement on certain results shows our commitment to creating change in those areas. That's why we look specifically at these outcomes:

- Environmental
- Economic
- Health
- Equity
- Resiliency
- Capacity

CRITERIA FOR READINESS TO ENGAGE IN SUSTAINABILITY WORK IN A COMMUNITY

Knowing who to partner with and where to prioritize resources can be challenging when there are so many places working to reduce vulnerability and enhance sustainability in their communities. Respectful partnerships are key to achieving lasting, positive outcomes and building trusting relationships cannot be understated for Green Neighborhoods. Our best practice has been to be invited into community-led visioning processes by local partners and to engage with communities that are open and interested in partnership. In addition, neighborhood character, political climate, and level of organizing in the community can be drivers for community change, ensuring that visions and recommendations get implemented. The criteria below describe indicators used to determine for readiness for advancing equitable and sustainable development.

- Areas of disinvestment and need are prioritized.
- Community is willing and interested in engaging.
- Structures exist at the neighborhood and/or municipal scale for strong and receptive local and grassroots leadership in sustainable and equitable development practices, or the desire to build this capacity is present.
- Goals and tools for implementing equitable sustainability practices are meaningful to the community.
- Policies, goals, and priorities of the community can be aligned with resources of partner organizations from multidisciplinary groups, with opportunities engage a range of sectors and there are to pilot innovative solutions.
- Understand leverage points that lead to change. For example, development t and reinvestment pressures, completion of plans with need for implementation, new plans or revision processes, or capital investment opportunities like new transit stations, can spur rapid change in a community.
- There is potential for investment and funding and a likelihood of success.
- The project lends itself to replicable successes that will help build a network of transferable lessons for the region.

PROCESS FOR ADVANCING GREEN NEIGHBORHOODS

The process we've established working with communities to advance sustainability goals reflects the lessons learned from our experience in the field. We have found that these processes, that rely on listening and learning from community leaders can provide the basis for others engaging deeply in communities.

1. Connect with community

Establish guiding principles for engaging with community-based groups. Respect knowledge and expertise of engaged groups while simultaneously acknowledging one's own expertise. Establish a joint understanding among partners and organizations for working effectively alongside one another.

2. Raise funds

Identify funding needs for achieving the joint vision, hosting community events, covering operational costs, and meeting capital needs. Collaborate closely on funding needs.

3. Build and establish trust with community partners

Community participation is at the center of the work. Building trust is a long-term process that establishes clear communication and allows for shifting goals based on new information and analysis.

4. Review historical context, documents, existing plans, and visions

As an outsider, it is important to read and review past documents and listen to existing visions. This step respects and values the time invested in developing existing visions and provides a baseline of understanding for conversations and decisions. In addition, the review includes an initial assessment of existing neighborhood conditions, assets, and plans to understand a community's sustainability needs.

5. Make an on-site visit

On-site visits serve several purposes. Visiting the neighborhood allows the project team to meet face-to-face with one another and members of the community, on the ground where the work is focused. Community-based walking and driving tours provide opportunities for additional listening and learning from local experts. Partners can also use this time in the community to evaluate initial analyses and assumptions made from reviewing documents.

6. Do additional planning

Revise work plan goals based on the outcomes from the site visit along with best available information and scientific analysis.

7. Conduct a charrette

Conduct an intensive neighborhood charrette that focuses on brainstorming with community members and local leaders. A charrette is an intense, multi-day process, bringing together a range of stakeholders across disciplines to solve a community challenge. As part of the process, develop a list of questions to ask the local team and local experts based on issues from the initial assessment that necessitate further exploration. Questions may relate to the mix of housing types and sizes, the cost of homes, proximity of the neighborhood to jobs, social equity, and many other elements of neighborhood sustainability. Evaluate neighborhood environmental assets and needs and engage in discussions about what changes would improve sustainability and quality of life. The approach is highly tailored based on local context. Charrettes often uncover previously unrecognized assets or solutions to a challenge. They can also help to garner support from local officials who are highly engaged in the design and success of the project.

8. Consolidate recommendations

Consolidate and evaluate findings from the charrette and include recommendations for implementation of projects. Recommendations are action-oriented. They should include a focus on resources and partners that support the effort as well as long-term sustainability for current and future residents and small businesses. The process of refining recommendations is iterative and includes feedback from local partners.

USING THE TOOL

Green Neighborhoods uses a holistic measurement tool that takes the best of LEED-ND and adds metrics for health, climate resilience, and equity. Although LEED-ND was originally intended as a green seal of approval for new development projects, the power of LEED-ND in this context is that it serves as a compilation of state-of-the-art sustainability best practices for neighborhoods.

The tool helps people—including residents, neighborhood leaders, policy makers, and community development corporations (CDCs)—more comprehensively understand their communities, sustainability plans, and how to implement their work in a way that is resilient and equitable.

These standards transform the way people think about designing and building their communities.

For more information on LEED-ND, we recommend NRDC's [A Citizen's Guide to LEED for Neighborhood Development](#) or the full USGBC [LEED-ND guide](#).

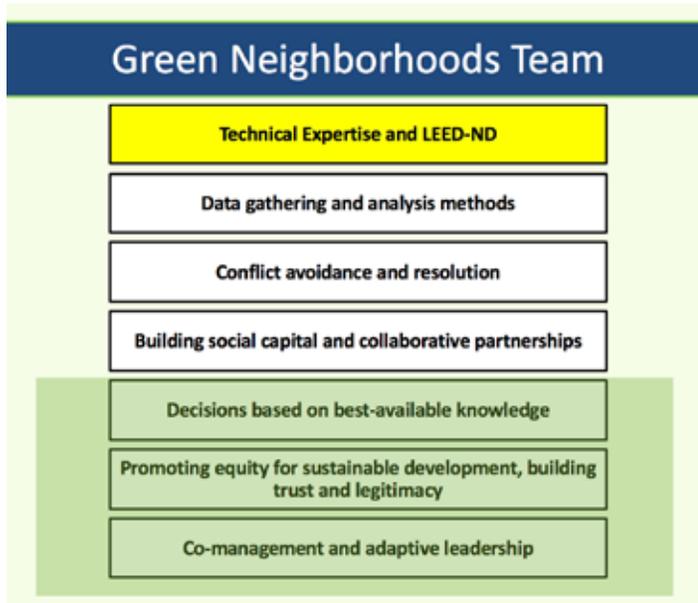
USING THE LEED-ND+ CHECKLIST

The checklist consists of 212 questions across a range of sustainability topics. The questions are designed to help the team think through and identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities in communities. A comprehensive picture of the community is generated on the basis of the topics covered in the checklist, including housing affordability; the intersection of housing density, connectivity, and transit accessibility; workforce development; and access to amenities. When the checklist is applied to both existing conditions in the neighborhood and future plans or visions, it illuminates gaps and synergies that exist in the community. While we understand that 212 questions constitute a lengthy checklist, this is also a core strength. Performing the assessment provides a compilation of data and calculations such as current land use statistics, the latest information on zoning concepts, and map data from Google Earth or other GIS sources. It can also consider input from local presentations or discussion topics from public or community meetings. Capturing this data from rich sources of information is critical to informed and inclusive decision making.

Anyone can use the checklist. Below are a few examples of how it has been applied as part of our work:

1. As part of a community-led process for sustainability planning and decision making. The tool is used as a framework to engage community members and partners in the concepts of sustainability and guide future decisions.
2. By a community member who wants to engage in or learn more about sustainability and equitable design.
3. By a local practitioner to evaluate a community plan or plans against sustainability metrics based on LEED-ND.

4. By a city or municipality to audit regulatory frameworks or planning documents for compliance with LEED-ND and to demonstrate a long-term commitment to sustainability.
5. By a community or municipality to catalyze market transformation by encouraging and capturing innovation in design.
6. As a marketing tool that encourages people to think holistically about neighborhood redevelopment and beyond the scale of a single building.



TECHNICAL EXPERTISE AND LEED-ND

Green Neighborhoods seeks to address pressing challenges of climate change, economic inequality, health, and racial inequity through community-based environmental management. Our strategies are based on fundamental principles of frontline equity. These strategies are implemented through a set of tools that build local policy expertise, knowledge, and voice.

- **Rapid LEED-ND Assessment**—We conduct a quick-fire review of neighborhood plans and demographics using NRDC’s LEED-ND checklist. The scope of work includes an assessment of existing conditions and plans, a site visit, and sustainability recommendations. There is also a focus on introducing the community to LEED-ND.
- **Plan Alignment**—This involves analyzing neighborhood plans, conducting project context research, and discovering relevant data. A plan alignment provides a community with a comprehensive vision based on existing plans and identifies overall strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and barriers.

- **Sustainability Audit**—We evaluate and audit neighborhood sustainability plans. The Green Neighborhoods team will review local codes and regulations to ensure compatibility with LEED-ND standards and consistency with the local comprehensive plan for development. The audit will include land use codes and regulations including zoning, subdivision, site plan, stormwater, transportation plans, historic preservation plan, and others as needed. A report of findings and recommendations is delivered.
- **Neighborhood Assessment and Sustainability Analysis**—This is an analysis of current land uses and plans in relation to LEED-ND standards and recommendations for attaining the highest level of environmental sustainability and social equity. The scope of work includes an assessment of existing land uses, master plans, development plans, and relevant historic documents.
- **Multi-day Charrette**—The Green Neighborhoods team plans, organizes, and facilitates community charrettes. A charrette is a two- to four-day conceptual planning workshop promoting experts, planners, and stakeholders to explore design opportunities and solutions for the project area. The scope of work includes touring the project site; convening local stakeholders; facilitating sustainability workshops, community meetings, and analysis; presenting recommendations; and providing a final report of findings.
- **Implementation Consulting Team**—We convene a project team comprising NRDC staff, design partners, green infrastructure experts, market analysis professionals, and economic feasibility experts. The scope of work includes collaboration of local and regional stakeholders, implementation strategy and time line, design renderings, feasibility analysis, policy advocacy, and ongoing relationship-building.
- **LEED-ND: Introduction to Neighborhood Sustainability Workshop and Presentation**—The Green Neighborhoods team presents an interactive workshop on the LEED-ND rating system and its relevance in local neighborhoods. The scope of work includes on-site meetings with local stakeholders, policy officials, and local leaders.

GREEN NEIGHBORHOOD SUCCESSES

Green Neighborhoods supports local advocates in their implementation of sustainable, equitable, and climate-adaptive strategies for neighborhood development. As Green Neighborhoods touches more and more communities throughout the United States, there is a significant opportunity to create a peer-to-peer learning network. This network of advocates and neighborhoods can share lessons learned, opportunities, and challenges faced during revitalization efforts. Neighborhoods in the same city or region can work together to advocate for policy change and infrastructure funding at the city level.

Some of our achievements:

- Work in nine neighborhoods
- Two LEED-ND certifications, including the first platinum rating
- More than \$4.5 million leveraged in direct investments in local communities
- \$35 million leveraged for equitable community redevelopment in Los Angeles’s Watts neighborhood
- Two new community positions created and filled
- Six awards for innovation in sustainability
- One model environmental justice ordinance passed

While every community’s story is different, the initiative has resulted in inspiring and lasting impacts, with each site broadening its commitment to sustainability and working to ensure that new development has a greener and more equitable footprint. Communities have also built on their ability to support these sustainability practices that serve their neighborhoods and cities for years to come.

PAST PROJECTS

Below is a brief description of each of our nine projects to date as well as links to additional information, final reports, and resources.



Mapleton–Fall Creek, Indianapolis: The Green Neighborhoods team partnered with the Mapleton–Fall Creek Development Corporation and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to build local capacity for sustainable

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practices while pursuing context-specific infill development supported by pocket parks. Because of the partnership’s efforts, the Mapleton–Fall Creek neighborhood has been designated as a district of special emphasis in the city of Indianapolis’s comprehensive plan.

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Paseo Verde, Philadelphia: With the Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, LISC, and the Jonathan Rose Companies, the team created a plan for a transit-oriented, affordable apartment complex that is now the highest-rated green development in the country under LEED for Neighborhood Development.

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Talbot Norfolk Triangle/Codman Square, Boston: Working with the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, TNT Neighbors United, and LISC, the team helped develop plans to convert a 42-acre degraded neighborhood into an environmentally sound and vibrant site. The plans included deep energy retrofits of the site’s existing building stock, the construction of new green buildings, and a redeveloped green street leading to the neighborhood’s new transit station. The neighborhood was able to leverage the partnership’s planning effort into a foundation grant to assist the plan’s implementation.



- Green Neighborhood Locations
- ★ Paseo Verde, Philadelphia
 - ★ Mapleton - Fall Creek, Indianapolis
 - ★ Codman Square-Talbot Norfolk Triangle, Boston
 - ★ City of Ithaca, NY
 - ★ Little Tokyo, Los Angeles
 - ★ Healthy Campus, Kansas City
 - ★ Watts Neighborhood, LA
 - ★ Ironbound CC, Newark
 - ★ Twin Cities, Minnesota
 - ★ Sun Valley, Denver
 - Westerly
 - Long Beach
 - ★ Claiborne Corridor, New Orleans

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City of Ithaca, New York: The Green Neighborhoods team analyzed the city’s major planning, transportation, and development guidance and made recommendations in support of green neighborhood initiatives, such as focusing development near existing infrastructure, establishing land use density minimums, removing minimum off-street parking requirements, and providing incentives for green development.

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East Ferry, Newark, New Jersey: In partnership with the Ironbound Community Corporation, the Green Neighborhoods team conducted a two-day charrette with community members to discuss local food, safety, water, and redevelopment activities. Coming out of the charrette, the team provided the community with recommendations to ensure climate resiliency, environmental justice, and sustainability after Hurricane Sandy.

© Kadi Benfield



Little Tokyo, Los Angeles: In collaboration with the Little Tokyo Service Center, Mithun, Enterprise Community Partners, and LISC, our team focused on protecting and enhancing the cultural identity of the country’s most iconic Japanese-American neighborhood. At the same time, the team developed policies and strategies to absorb new development, build more-walkable streets, and incorporate new green infrastructure for energy and water management. The fruits of this partnership resulted in the Sustainable Little Tokyo Initiative.

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Watts, Los Angeles, California: To commemorate the 1965 Watts Riots, we partnered with Grant Housing and Economic Development Corporation and community groups to focus on specific public and private redevelopment projects of lasting benefit to the residents of Watts. We worked together to honor the culture, community, and ongoing efforts to enhance and bring economic growth to the neighborhood using the best sustainable practices available. The project, Watts Re:Imagined, is a vision for a diverse and thriving community that honors culture, values prosperity, and preserves natural resources.

© Marissa



Healthy Campus, Kansas City, Kansas: We conducted a Green Neighborhood Rapid Assessment, and the recommendations included in that analysis are being incorporated into Kansas City’s Healthy Campus Plan.

© Saint Paul Open Space Guidelines



Ford Redevelopment Site, Minneapolis–St. Paul: The Green Neighborhoods team provided recommendations for the sustainable redevelopment of the Twin Cities Ford Assembly Plant. A comprehensive report analyzed existing planning documents to lay out a vision for harnessing the potential of this site.