Development of Equity Focus Areas in Montgomery County

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Description

Planning staff will provide a briefing to the Board on the Planning Department's Equity Focus Areas (EFA) project. The EFA project developed a data driven, analytical tool to identify marginalized populations for analysis of racial equity and social justice issues for supporting ongoing and future planning efforts. The result is a screening tool based on simple analysis of core equity variables to define the highest concentrations of marginalized populations, Equity Focus Areas. The approach confines the scope to income, race and ethnicity, and limited English language skills to define EFA. This tool will assist analysis of EFA access to opportunity and resources, for example employment, transportation, education, healthy communities, and government services. The briefing will cover the purpose, methodology, results, initial recommendations, and analytical tools of the Equity Focus Areas project. This briefing is an opportunity for the Planning Board to discuss the Equity Focus Area project and provide comments to staff.

Background

Equity is a critical and long-overlooked topic within the fields of planning, public policy and government decision-making. In recent years, particularly as society increasingly confronts the legacy of structural and institutional racism, the topic of equity had become a key focus for policymakers and government agencies. In 2019, the County Council passed the Racial Equity and Social Justice Act, which requires the Planning Board to consider racial equity and social justice as part of master plans. Montgomery County is among the most diverse counties nationwide and considered one of the best places to live and work. However, access to opportunities is not equally available to all parts of the county. Many communities face disadvantages in accessing jobs, quality retail, high-performing schools, parks and other resources. Generally, these amenities are more widely available in higher income neighborhoods and transit-rich locations. The high cost of living in these places, especially housing cost, is an insurmountable barrier for low-income families, thus limiting their access to these amenities and other opportunities.

Montgomery Planning recognizes and acknowledges the role that our plans and policies have played in creating and perpetuating racial inequity in Montgomery County. We are committed to transforming the way

we work as we seek to address, mitigate, and eliminate inequities from the past and develop planning solutions to create equitable communities in the future. While it will take time to fully develop a new methodology for equity in the planning process, we cannot delay applying an equity lens to our work.

The Equity Focus Areas project seeks to identify places in the county where residents may be experiencing disproportionate barriers due to a combination of demographic characteristics. The purpose of this project is to provide the groundwork for further equity analyses. This project will support ongoing and future M-NCPPC Montgomery Parks and Planning projects such as the Montgomery County General Plan Thrive 2050, the Planning Department's Equity in Planning Initiative, Master and Sector planning efforts, and Montgomery Parks' Capital Improvement Program prioritization and other parks, trails, permitting or facility-specific strategic planning efforts.

Methodology

There is no one way to measure and analyze equity. Research and literature review for this project revealed two camps in equity analysis: a simple approach using income and race, grounded in the history of the Environmental Justice movement; and a more robust approach, using many variables, exploring equity of protected classes, and framed by many factors such as demographics, environment, economics, transportation, and health. The Equity Focus Areas project employs the first approach by examining three specific variables – household income, race and ethnicity, and English language proficiency – at the U.S. Census Tract scale in order to identify areas of the county that may experience the highest inequities.

Datasets

The Equity Focus Areas (EFAs) project uses three variables to analyze and map EFAs: household income, race and ethnicity, and English language proficiency. This project uses the latest datasets available during development, sourced from Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the American Communities Survey, all at U.S. Census Tract level.

Analysis Methods

This project reviewed numerous case studies and analysis methods from jurisdictions around the country, including the Washington, DC region[1]. The EFAs project devises a methodology and performs equity analysis specific to Montgomery County, Maryland in order to create a more accurate local assessment. This project uses a modified indexing approach in order to combine and analyze the variables of income, race and ethnicity, and language. The project ensured datasets were statistically valid at the Census Tract level and data was normalized to a County standard.

The intention of this project was to create a single layer at the U.S. Census Tract scale identifying those areas in the county with high concentrations of lower-income people of color who also speak English less than well.

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[1] Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments created Equity Emphasis Areas (EEA) for the Environmental Justice analysis of the long-range transportation plan, Visualize 2045. MWCOG's EEAs are derived by standardizing tract level data to a regional average, normalizing results across the Washington, D.C. region. The Planning Department's EFA project devises a methodology using local data and performs equity analysis specific to Montgomery County. An equity analysis tailored to Montgomery County provides a more representative, local assessment.

This modified indexing approach first combines the datasets of income with race and ethnicity and then overlays the dataset of English language proficiency. The Equity tool is constructed as a binary index with the result identifying Census tracts that are either meet the EFAs criteria or do not and are not classified as an EFA.

Results

The Equity Focus Areas project identified 56 Census Tracts out of 215 (26%) in the County that meet the criteria outlined above in the methodology section (Figure 1). The Equity Focus Areas are primarily found along the I-270 Corridor, the Route 29 Corridor, and the eastern portion of Down County. There are approximately 275,875 people or 26.5 % of the County population living in the tracts identified as Equity Focus Areas.

Initial analysis explored the demographic characteristics of the EFAs. Compared to the county overall, the population in these tracts is younger, has a lower educational attainment level, and more likely to be Hispanic. The income of one-third of the households is under $50,000 and those households experience a higher incidence of housing costs burden. Households in EFAs are less likely to be owner-occupied and the median housing value is two-thirds of the value countywide.
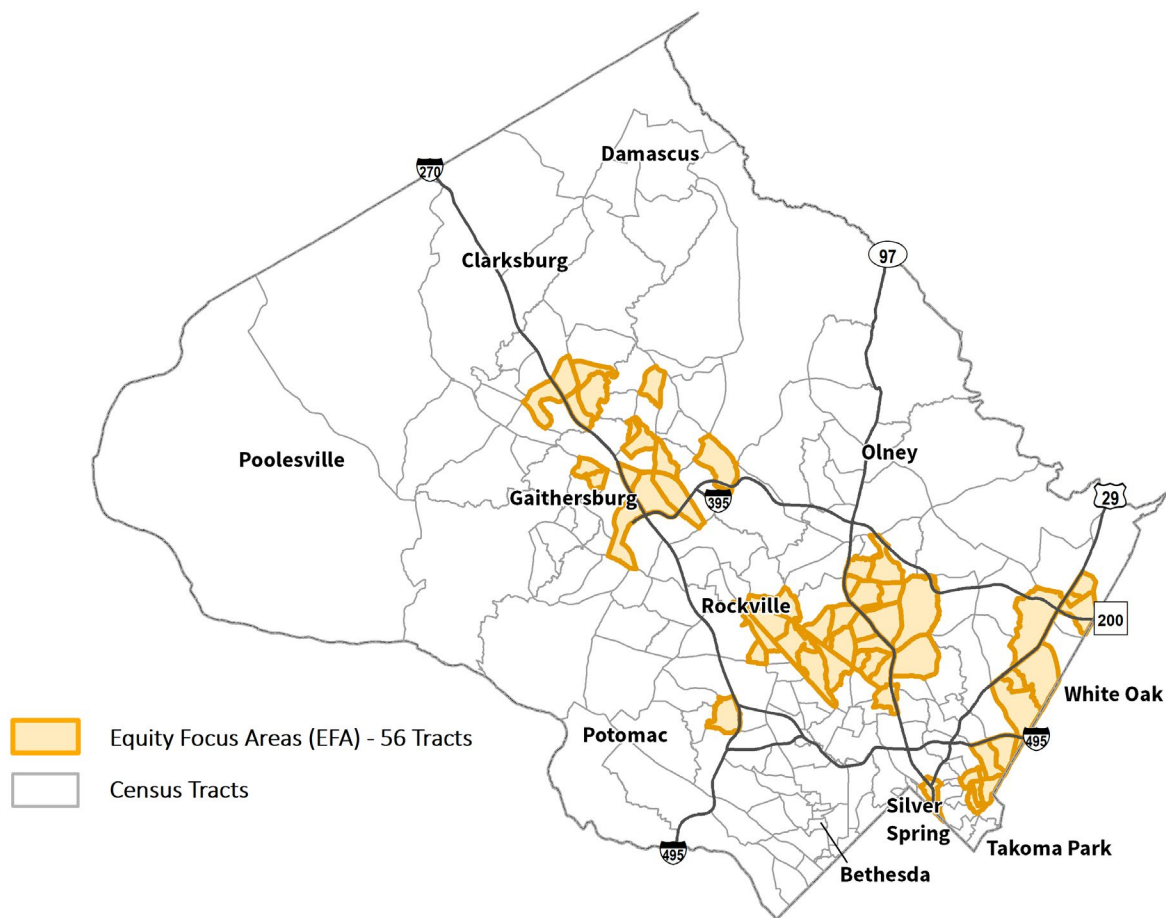

Figure 1 Equity Focus Areas in Montgomery County, MD

Implementation and Next Steps

It is not enough to document inequalities at the county level, it is important to understand the disparities among communities and to explore the contributing determinants leading to inequities. Identifying EFAs, areas that may not have equitable access to resources or opportunities, help direct planning efforts to better understand existing conditions, the area's history, and how best to engage the community. As a tool, EFAs facilitate bringing racial equity and social justice considerations into the master plan process. EFAs provide the framework for analysis of marginalized communities' access to opportunity and resources, for example employment, transportation, education, parks, trails and open spaces, healthy communities, and government services.

The primary goal of the Equity Focus Areas project is to create a tool that will help guide numerous M-NCPPC Park and Planning projects and processes, including by not limited to: Master and Sector planning projects; Park and Facility Planning; Park CIP programming; Parks Department land acquisition; and Parks Department public engagement and activation efforts. The next steps for this project include the refinement of the Equity Focus Areas tools such as the story map and map gallery; coordination with the M-NCPPC Equity in Master Planning efforts and numerous teams at the Parks Department; and coordination with equity analysis efforts at other county agencies.

All these efforts bring equity analysis into current projects. The implementation of EFAs serves as a springboard, applying what we have learned, to the development of the Equity Opportunity Index, a more robust, multi-variable modeling approach, which will examine numerous additional datasets ranging from health, environmental quality, housing, transportation and available services. The EOI analysis of critically selected demographic, economic, and physical factors will provide additional detail to identify areas that are opportunity rich or challenged. The EOI tool will examine conditions across the county depicting gradations of access to opportunities and resources. The results will be a relative scale of opportunity in contrast to the dichotomy of being either in an EFA or out. The methodology for deriving the Equity Opportunity Index and initial results are anticipated by the end of this year.