

# Organizer Roundtable: Racial Equity Impact Policies



On September 26, 2009, Twin Cities' activists and organizers joined in discussion on racial equity impact policies. This roundtable centered on the work of a coalition that includes the Alliance, Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation (ASANDC), Community Stabilization Project (CSP) Jewish Community Action (JCA), and partner Organizing Apprenticeship Project, which is working with the St. Paul Planning and Economic Development Department to incorporate racial equity into the development subsidies of the city. The presenters for this roundtable were **Nieeta Presley**, executive director of ASANDC, **Metric Giles**, community organizer for CSP, and **Vic Rosenthal**, executive director of JCA.

Alliance coalition organizer Joan Vanhala presented a brief introduction to the St. Paul Racial Equity Impact Policy. The Racial Equity Impact Policy coalition is working with the city of St. Paul to include racial and economic demographics into the reports that are required for approving city-subsidized development projects. The goal is to provide a tool to measure the equity impacts -- both positive and negative -- of development projects that seek large public subsidies. A draft [Equity Impact Report](#) has been presented to city staff, who have been working to integrate this proposed report into their existing reports, which are reviewed by the city council before a development subsidy can be approved.

Vic Rosenthal is the executive director of [Jewish Community Action](#), which was founded in 1995, to unite Jews throughout Minnesota in pursuit of social and economic justice. JCA is currently working on immigrant rights, health care reform, affordable housing and racial equity campaigns.

Six years ago, Vic helped to organize a hearing on racial equity issues related to the city of St. Paul's hiring, contracting and procurement. This hearing resulted in the establishment of the Equal Access Working Group, which recognized that the city's policies were not adequately addressing equal opportunities. The Equal Access Working Group leveraged an [audit](#) by an independent consultant on the city's practices, which revealed that each city department was working separately with no clear goals and no accountability for hiring of people of color and women. It also revealed that there was a list of white-owned contractors who were receiving the contracts year after year.

The Equal Access Working Group and the analysis of the audit brought about a fundamental change to the way the city does business. The [Human Rights & Equal Economic Opportunity](#) (HREEO) department was established, and its new director Luz Frias was hired in the spring of 2009. HREEO consolidated the accountability of hiring, contracting and procurement all under one department.

Following this effort, the Racial Equity Impact Policy group was formed to promote racial equity in development projects within the city of St. Paul. This group initially received the support of city council president Kathy Lantry and city attorney John Choi. With the support of city

leadership, the group began meeting with city staff to begin working out the details of how to include racial equity measures into the city's development proposal process. The Racial Equity Impact Policy group is also looking into the important role of community review of development projects, and the challenge of how to engage more communities of color into that process.

Metric Giles, is working with [Community Stabilization Project](#), to promote affordable housing, focusing on the area around University Avenue in preparation of the coming of the Central Corridor LRT. Metric talked about institutionalized racism and how the benefits of many policies in our country and our region excluded African Americans and other people of color. Metric emphasized the importance of understanding that racial disparities are rooted in our society's inherent and systemic racism. Metric encouraged the organizers who attended the roundtable to create space for European Americans to recognize their racism and understand white privilege.

Metric first moved to St. Paul as a young boy and remembers playing in huge dirt piles that were to become Interstate 94. The placement of I-94, which led to the destruction of many African-American businesses and housing in the Rondo community, was a major topic of family and community conversations. To have a deeper understanding of the impact of I-94 on the Rondo community, Metric directed participants to read [Crusaders for Justice: A Chronicle of Protest by Agitators, Advocates and Activists in their Struggle for Civil and Human Rights in St. Paul, Minnesota](#) by Arthur C. McWatt . Metric emphasized that the construction of I-94 through the center of this African American community is a prime example of a racist policy that had a tremendous impact on our region.

Nieeta Presley, of the [Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation](#) spoke about the history of ASANDC, which became a focal point for the Rondo community to reconnect and come together to address the negative impacts on their neighborhood. ASANDC became a leader in the revitalization of the neighborhood, ensuring that the residents had a voice in the process. Nieeta recommended that the roundtable attendees read the book [Color of Wealth](#) (by M. Lui, B. Robles, B. Leondar-Wright, R. Brewer, R. Adamson), which addresses how people are marginalized by policies and the distribution of resources.

ASANDC is now working on projects that will help the community benefit from the development of the Central Corridor LRT. The Frogtown area has the potential to be left out of the development, or to be strengthened by it through leveraging the existing assets of the community. ASANDC is working to ensure that the Frogtown communities can survive and thrive before, during and after the construction of the Central Corridor LRT.

Nieeta stated that all public policies have the implications of racial impact.. She told the organizers present that they can't look at their organizing work without attempting to unveil the inherent racism within our institutions. The Racial Equity Impact Policy is a tool to help the city equitably increase community prosperity through development projects.

In the following discussion, the participants and the speakers discussed how the process to create a community benefits agreement can also engage local community members in leveraging benefits from development. One participant mentioned that nonprofit developers should be role

models to private developers in showing how racial equity can be integrated into development projects. It was also noted that there is still more work to be done in building trust between communities of color and developers.

Participants also raised concerns about the accuracy of the data collected on communities. Coalition members noted that the city of St. Paul currently uses Wilder Center [neighborhood profiles](#) for demographic information. Data accuracy is an important question. This group has been talking with the Wilder Center and the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy about possible strategies to get more detailed demographic information for specific development proposals.

#### Additional Resources:

- [Twin Cities Compass](#) has used demographic data to measure racial disparities in our region.
- King County in the state of Washington has begun the process of looking at racial disparities in their social services through their [Equity and Social Justice Initiative](#).
- The Praxis Project has published [Developing an Equity Impact Statement: A tool for local policy making](#).
- The Boston Indicators Project has also measured [racial disparities](#) in the Boston region.

#### **About Organizer Roundtables**

Organizer Roundtables are one of the Alliance's strategies to build a network of organizers that work on issues related to growth and development in the Twin Cities. Roundtables are led by and for organizers and are held monthly at the Alliance's offices in Minneapolis. Please check our web site at [www.metrostability.org](http://www.metrostability.org) for upcoming roundtables.