

# City of Spokane Climate Justice Focus Group Summary

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## Overview

The City of Spokane is planning for climate change with a commitment to climate justice. Climate justice recognizes that the changing climate disproportionately harms certain populations and prioritizes the health and safety of those most at risk—often referred to as overburdened communities. Overburdened communities were identified in the City’s Spokane Climate Impacts Analysis and Justice Memo. To inform the Climate Vulnerability and Risk Assessment, the City of Spokane aimed to hear directly from overburdened communities. Focus groups provide an opportunity to collect in-depth feedback from groups within the community that may be underrepresented in other public engagement opportunities and engage in more targeted discussions.

The City of Spokane hosted a climate justice focus group with participants from local community-based organizations representing houseless, Muslim, Asian, BIPOC, immigrant, refugee, and environmental justice communities. This focus group aimed to hear directly from overburdened communities who are most likely to experience the impacts of climate change first and worst. Participants shared their lived experiences and concerns, offered ideas for reducing emissions and building a more resilient Spokane, and discussed barriers to participating in climate action. Insights from this focus group informed the development of the Climate Vulnerability and Risk Assessment. The key takeaways and notes below have been anonymized and synthesized.

<b>Date &amp; Time</b>	Wednesday, May 7 6:00-7:30 PM
<b>Location</b>	Online, via zoom
<b># of Participants</b>	8
<b>City and Consulting Attendees</b>	Meg Horst, facilitator, Cascadia Consulting Sarah Farbstein, note taker, Cascadia Consulting Maren Murphy, City of Spokane



## Objectives

- Collect in-depth feedback from groups within the community that may be underrepresented in other public engagement opportunities and those who will face disproportionate impacts from climate hazards (e.g. overburdened communities and vulnerable populations).
- Identify equity considerations/unintended consequences of implementing actions within the Climate Element (e.g., who benefits? Who is burdened? How can the disproportionate impacts be addressed?).
- Identify top priorities and key considerations of climate resilience policies.

## Key Takeaways

- Climate solutions should include green jobs, especially for young people, canopy/tree planting, and increased transit.
- Wildfires and smoke were top concerns across the focus group participants, along with extreme heat.
- Unhoused individuals, elders, renters, disabled people, and non-English speakers are among the most vulnerable.
- Language access and communication gaps are major barriers in both emergencies and ongoing climate education.
- Need to present disaggregated data to identify disparities and how factors are affecting communities and where gaps are.
- Housing quality, especially in rentals, and income are major contributing factors to climate vulnerability.
- People often prioritize immediate survival needs (e.g., housing, food) over long-term climate issues.
- Community trust and cultural relevance are key to successful climate outreach—trusted messengers matter. Community leaders as climate ambassadors within cultural networks.
- Partner with local nonprofits that are doing climate work and research to bridge access and build trust within the community and get their input as well.
- Participants want to see enforcement of building codes and accountability for business practices that harm the environment.
- Participants stressed the need for a cultural shift, with incentives and communication campaigns to make climate action community driven and emphasize the urgent priority for action.
- Make climate justice part of the City's systems thinking.

## Discussion Questions

1. What climate impacts are you concerned about in your community? Which climate impact worries you the most?
  - Wildfire smoke and worsening fire seasons are a top concern.
  - Extreme heat events like the 2021 heat dome were repeatedly mentioned.
  - Prolonged freezing temperatures are also becoming more common.



- There are major concerns about the compounding impacts on physical and mental health.
  - Pollution from wildfires impacts natural and cultural resources (e.g., rivers).
  - There is deep concern about long-term infrastructure resilience in the face of climate change.
  - Concern about rising costs to pay rent, energy bills and impacts from climate hazards.
2. Are there specific people, places, or cultural resources in your community that you think are most at risk from climate change? How have you already seen these impacts in your daily life?
- Economic hardship limits people’s ability to cope (e.g., fixed-income elders choosing between food, medicine, and energy bills).
  - Climate change disproportionately affects unhoused individuals, seniors, people with disabilities, people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and low-income renters.
  - Housing conditions (e.g., lack of A/C, poor insulation) exacerbate vulnerability during climate events. People living in poor-quality housing must often choose between staying cool or breathing clean air (they don’t have AC so they need to open windows at night to cool their home, including when the air quality outside is poor due to wildfire smoke). Inadequate infrastructure leaves individuals in poor housing conditions that make it difficult to cope with extreme events.
  - Refugees and immigrants—particularly Marshallese, Spanish, and Ukrainian speakers—face language access barriers during emergencies. Emergency communications often fail to reach linguistically or digitally isolated communities.
  - Incarcerated individuals have limited protections.
  - People with pre-existing health conditions (e.g., asthma) are already experiencing worsening air quality impacts.
  - Social isolation (e.g., elders in upstairs units without assistance) increases disaster risk.
3. What ideas do you have for how Spokane can better address climate change in ways that address existing barriers and are beneficial for frontline communities?
- Expand tree planting and maintain healthy canopy, especially in underserved areas.
  - Invest in accessible, reliable mass transit and consider an electric train system.
  - Fund and partner with trusted community organizations for outreach and education.
  - Translate materials into multiple languages and make them accessible to preliterate individuals (i.e. offer nonwritten materials such as videos).
  - Train trusted messengers from within cultural communities to serve as climate ambassadors.
  - Increase accountability and enforcement for building codes and business practices.
  - Promote policies that hold businesses responsible for their environmental impacts.
  - Improve access to climate-resilient building materials and retrofit programs for renters.
  - Foster community-based solutions (i.e. solutions that the community has identified themselves) and advocate for climate justice policies at the local and state levels. For example, create policies that hold businesses accountable.
  - Use positive reinforcement to build community pride around climate efforts.
  - Employ youth in climate-related jobs to build local capacity and cultural momentum.



- Work with schools about the importance of Climate Justice
4. What other benefits of climate planning are most important to you? For example, making Spokane more walkable, improving air quality, creating green jobs for young people, or making transportation more accessible.
- Improving conditions for socially vulnerable communities.
  - Improving access to transit.
  - Creating green jobs for young people.
5. What barriers exist for your community to take climate action?
- Economic insecurity often prevents families from prioritizing climate concerns (e.g., housing, food insecurity).
  - Lack of access to reliable information and education.
  - Disengagement or indifference among the broader population.
  - Poor quality housing with landlords who are unmotivated to make climate-resilient upgrades.
6. What support would help your community take meaningful climate action?
- Greater access to education, resources, and fiscal incentives.
  - Stronger and more consistent communication from leadership.
  - Make climate justice an integral part of the City's planning.
  - More support for community-led solutions.
  - Leadership that understands and integrates the lived experience of frontline communities.
  - Appreciative of the City's efforts in engaging on climate justice topics and beginning outreach with communities.
7. What does climate justice mean to you?
- Access, support, resources, education
  - Accountability
  - Climate justice must be well-resourced if it is to be prioritized and communities must be well-resourced to engage in this work.
  - Where you grow up, what community you are a part of, does not determine how long you live or access to healthy clean air, water, housing
  - Climate justice is when it is as universal as breathing
  - Liberation - releasing and extracting from colonial capitalist systems that created the problem to begin with.
  - Climate justice is health equity.