Regional Council’s Approach to Environmental Justice in the VISION 2020+20 Project

PSRC has made a strong commitment to integrating Title VI into its ongoing work program. As part of this commitment, specific Environmental Justice outreach efforts and research programs are being designed to support the update of VISION 2020. This outreach and research will help assure broad participation, and that the region’s vision and revised policies take into account issues pertinent to EJ communities. Enhanced outreach will also help to establish a better foundation for ensuring the active participation of special population groups into the regional comprehensive planning process over the long term.

To this end, the Regional Council has developed a three-step environmental justice game plan for the VISION 2020+20 project. The focus in Step 1 is to document and communicate the Regional Council’s responsibility for environmental justice, along with the findings of analysis and outreach that the Regional Council has conducted to date. Step 2 defines the scope of environmental justice analysis that will be conducted as part of the VISION 2020+20 environmental impact statement. Step 3 will consist of continued and enhanced direct outreach throughout the VISION 2020+20 project.

**Step 1: Background and Documentation:** The Regional Council will clearly explain its responsibilities for Environmental Justice in the project, document past findings and experiences, and discuss the concerns that came up in the project scoping period. Documentation and data will be provided to the PSRC environmental consultant for use in the preparation of the environmental impact statement, and published on the agency’s web page. Documentation will include:

- An explanation of the environmental justice responsibilities and scale of analysis that is appropriate for long-range planning activities and Metropolitan Planning Organizations.
- An explanation of the Regional Council’s approach to environmental justice in the VISION 2020+20 project (see Steps 2 and 3 below)
- Key findings from prior Regional Council environmental justice research and outreach, including:
  - Environmental justice analysis conducted for Destination 2030
  - Identification of existing low-income and minority residential and employment patterns, as published in the PSRC Environmental Justice Demographic Profile (2003)
  - Analyses of poverty and transportation data in the central Puget Sound Region
• Analysis of completed regional transportation projects conducted for the 2005 – 2007 Transportation Improvement Program
• Documentation of social justice issues that were identified in the scoping phase of the VISION 2020+20 project
• An exploration of the state of the art of environmental justice methods and activities, from a PSRC review of published academic literature and federal agency guidance
• Documentation of the history and membership of an Environmental Justice Advisory Group, first convened by PSRC staff in November 2004
• Findings from a series of four direct outreach focus groups with community leaders that investigated minority and low income community needs and familiarity and perceptions of regional policies. This direct outreach was conducted by the Regional Council’s public outreach consultant in Spring 2005
• Findings from an analysis of Environmental Health issues associated with urban development, prepared by Gail Sandlin, University of Washington

**Step 2: Strategy for Analyzing Alternatives.** Consistent with the approach taken to environmental justice analysis conducted as part of the development of *Destination 2030*, the Regional Council will seek to ensure that the revised vision is developed with the full participation of minority and low income communities, and that it considers their needs. The VISION 2020+20 environmental impact statement will include an environmental justice analysis that builds on the data and findings described above to analyze the potential for disproportionately high and adverse effects on low income and minority communities that might arise from alternative regional growth patterns. The EIS will:

• Map current (base year) locations of EJ communities
• Analyze current (base year) location of jobs in relation to EJ communities
• Analyze planned transportation system improvements (*Destination 2030*) in relation to EJ communities
• Discuss regional demographic trends in relation to minority and low-income communities
• Identify where regional growth alternatives appear to concentrate growth in relation to historic and current concentrations of minority and low-income people, and consider the identified needs of impacted populations.
• Assess how the following areas could impact minority of low-income populations.
  • Land Use, Population, Employment and Housing
  • Air Quality
  • Noise
  • Environmental Health
Step 3: Outreach. Broad and representative public involvement in planning is a challenge for all groups, and the more abstract the policy, the more difficult it is to engage the broader community. Reaching out to environmental justice communities, however, presents additional challenges, such as:

- Cultural or historical differences that impede outspokenness about government issues
- Language or literacy barriers
- Fear of not being welcome at meetings that are attended by people who are racially different
- Access to transportation to attend meetings

Successful environmental justice efforts have taken these factors into account. Locally, planning efforts such as for the Seattle Comprehensive Plan, Sound Transit, the I-405 Corridor Program, and Seattle Housing’s Hope VI projects, have spoken to the need to:

- Use a variety of venues to get input
- Develop multi-lingual materials that inform non-English speaking populations about project issues
- Speak about issues in terms that are relevant to population group
- Work within existing EJ community networks and media

In Fall 2005, the PSRC will develop an overall strategy for public outreach for the remainder of the VISION 2020+20 project. The public involvement plan will be designed to ensure that members of low-income and minority populations have sufficient opportunities to participate in the environmental review and associated decision-making processes. The plan will specifically identify strategies for overcoming some of the challenges in conducting outreach and involving minority and low-income communities, including the timing and location of meetings, and language and cultural barriers. The plan will provide detailed strategies for providing more effective and engaging notice of meetings and key decision points, and of opportunities for public comment and involvement. The plan will address the accessibility of written and other materials, and methods for tracking comments.
When the initial analysis of the alternatives has been published in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, a series of targeted public meetings will be held with minority and low-income communities to solicit direct feedback on preliminary findings presented in the DEIS. The strategies developed in the public involvement plan will help to assure meaningful participation. The meetings will be designed to solicit comments on the initial analysis and findings. The comments and insight gained from this direct outreach will provide valuable information for the development of a preferred draft vision, and the preparation of the final environmental impact statement. The response to comments in the FEIS will identify how comments have been addressed and have influenced the draft vision.