



High Line Canal Conservancy - Equity in Action Background + Guiding Document

Approved by Board of Directors on July 21, 2022

INTRODUCTION

This Equity in Action Background + Guiding Document explains why and how diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) guide the High Line Canal Conservancy's (Conservancy) work at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels. This document is intended to orient Conservancy Board of Directors, staff and partners to the historical context of the High Line Canal that contributed to inequities within our region and to the actions and progress the Conservancy is making to address DEIA. The information will be adapted into a story and message for different platforms (i.e., public statements, the website, social media, grant applications and other communications) and will evolve and be revisited quarterly by the Conservancy's DEIA Task Force.

It is important that Conservancy staff, Board of Directors, external contractors and other close partners all have the following common understanding that equity "is about taking deliberate actions to remove systemic, group, and individual barriers and obstacles that hinder opportunities and disrupt well-being. Equity is achieved through the identification and elimination of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that create and reinforce unfair outcomes." (Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks, @2021 Nene Molefl, Julie O'Mara, Alan Richter). It is also important to understand the difference between equity and equality. "Although both promote fairness, equality achieves this through treating everyone the same, regardless of need and circumstances. Equity achieves this through treating people differently dependent on need, circumstance and consideration of historical and systemic inequities." (Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks, @2021 Nene Molefl, Julie O'Mara, Alan Richter). In addition, it should be commonly understood that the terms inclusive and inclusion, as it relates to the Canal and Conservancy, mean that all people and communities that are or could be impacted by the Canal are represented, meaningfully involved, welcomed to engage and valued, considering, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, economics, age, geography, ability and sexual orientation.

WHO WE ARE

Mission: The mission of the Conservancy is to preserve, protect and enhance the 71-mile-long Canal, in partnership with the public.

Vision: The High Line Canal's 71 meandering miles will be preserved and enhanced as a cherished greenway that connects people to nature and binds varied communities together from the foothills to the plains.

Impact: The Conservancy's Strategic Business Plan (2019-2024) affirms its commitment to preserve and enhance the Canal with projects and programs that improve quality of life and the environment and provide measurable benefits for all people. The Conservancy is working with its partners to:

- Ensure permanent protection of the 71-mile Canal with sustainable funding and enhancements;
- Enhance public use of the Canal through improved access, safety and quality of visitor experience; and



- Improve environmental health for the Canal with regionwide benefits through stormwater management and other ecological enhancements.

LAND AND PEOPLE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Conservancy acknowledges that the land on which the Canal sits is the traditional territory of the Nuu-agma-tuvu-pu (Ute), Cheyenne and Arapaho Peoples. We honor elders past, present and future who have stewarded this land throughout the generations, respect Indigenous methods for caring for the land, and recognize the continued exclusions and erasures of Indigenous Peoples.

As stewards of the Canal land, we provide this Land and People Acknowledgment as one way of recognizing Colorado's inequitable and violent history toward Indigenous people and tribes and recognizing the historical and continuing connection between Indigenous Peoples and their native land:

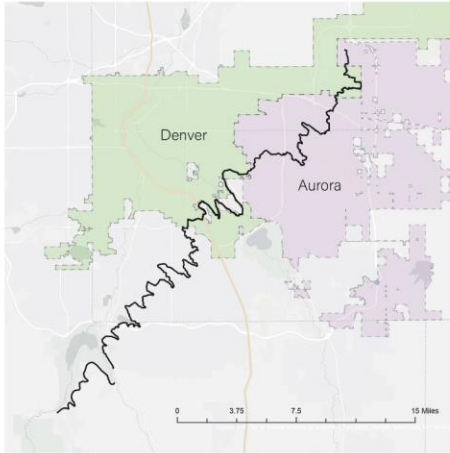
EQUITY WHY

The Conservancy staff and Board of Directors believe that everyone deserves safe, easy to access trails and park space to support enjoyable experiences, healthy lifestyles and a more resilient natural environment. As our region experiences unprecedented development and population growth, the 71-mile High Line Canal (Canal) represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to increase recreational access to nature, increasing mental health and wellness for generations of Coloradans. Today, after years of community visioning and collaborative planning, the historic 71-mile High Line Canal is being reimagined by the community as an ecological resource and a place where millions of people can easily connect to nature while moving throughout their community and the Denver region. However, much work remains to improve the Canal for all communities and the Conservancy is committed to doing this through an equity- and community-centered approach.

Today, the Canal moves through some of the most diverse neighborhoods in the region, especially along sections of trail in Aurora, Denver and unincorporated Arapahoe County, collectively referred to as the Northeast. Communities of color and low-income neighborhoods in the Northeast experience a stark inequity in access to quality open spaces as highlighted in The Trust for Public Land's Parkscore and include over 101,600 residents that live below 60% of the median income for the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood Metropolitan Statistical Area with a median income of just over \$39,000. Across these communities, the population is 32% Latino and 22% Black, with the largest concentrations of Latino and Black communities centered in Aurora and the Green Valley Ranch neighborhood of Denver. The life expectancy in these neighborhoods can be up to 10 years shorter than in the communities along the Canal in the southern suburbs, and rates of chronic illnesses such as diabetes and asthma are often nearly double the state average.

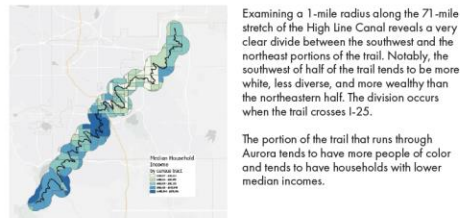
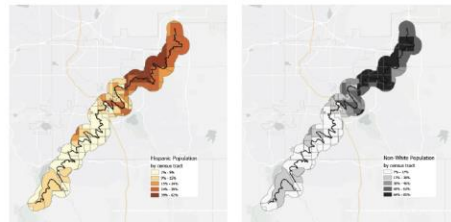
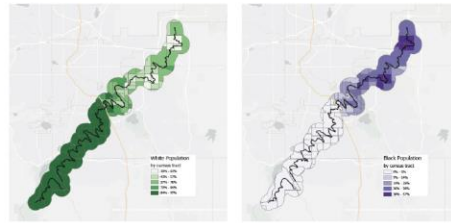
HIGH LINE CANAL

A TRAIL DIVIDED



The High Line Canal spans 71 miles through the Denver Metropolitan Area, traversing the two biggest cities of Denver and Aurora. It is divided almost exactly in half by Interstate 25.

EQUITY MAPPING



Examining a 1-mile radius along the 71-mile stretch of the High Line Canal reveals a very clear divide between the southwest and the northeast portions of the trail. Notably, the southwest of half of the trail tends to be more white, less diverse, and more wealthy than the northeastern half. The division occurs when the trail crosses I-25.

The portion of the trail that runs through Aurora tends to have more people of color and tends to have households with lower median incomes.

In addition, the Canal connects people of all abilities across our region and the Conservancy is committed to improving the accessibility of this resource to ensure all people have an opportunity to connect with nature. The gentle slope of the Canal, dropping just two feet for every mile traveled, provides an opportunity for people with disabilities to recreate and connect with the outdoors in the heart of our region. As indicated by the [CDC](#), nearly 20% of adults in Colorado have a disability and 9% of adults have a disability that impacts mobility, comprising a population that is too often left out of outdoor recreation opportunities.

The Conservancy recognizes that for all communities to benefit from the Canal as a recreational and ecological resource, the Conservancy needs to focus on overcoming inequities due to factors including historical underinvestment in Black, Latino and immigrant communities, barriers to access for low-income neighborhoods and people with disabilities, and a lack of adequate representation of all residents within community engagement efforts.

Barriers

The following barriers refer to conditions or obstacles that prevent many community members from using or accessing the High Line Canal and/or benefiting from it as an open space resource. We acknowledge that all communities are unique and not all community members experience each of these barriers. This list represents the most common barriers that we have identified through both the Conservancy's observations and outreach to date, as well as local and national studies.

- **Systemic inequities**
 - Historical and current injustices and unjust policies such as redlining, forced migration, and economic segregation are just a few of the factors that have created barriers to,



and a gradient of distance from, natural areas for people of color and low-income communities (Grove et al., 2018, 524-587).

- As a result of discriminatory policies, practices, and customs, 74 percent of communities of color in the United States live in nature-deprived areas, compared with just 23 percent of their white neighbors. (Shea et al., 2020)
- **Barriers to use of outdoor space and connection to nature**
 - Perceived lack of safety, which can include:
 - Fear of criminal activity on the Canal
 - Mistrust of law enforcement and/or government personnel
 - Conflicts between users
 - Less access to personal transportation
- **Investment in the Canal**
 - Lack of recognition as an open space and investment by governments in the Canal as traditional park infrastructure
 - Limited maintenance of the Canal channel/corridor by Denver Water due to the Canal's current lack of functional utility as a water irrigation system in the Northeast
- **Physical barriers to access the Canal**
 - Fenced off from communities (Friendly Village and Green Valley Ranch as examples)
 - Limited signage on the Canal and lack of directional signage leading to the trail
 - Limited and unsafe access points (There are nearly twice as many formal access points to the trail in the southern half of the corridor as in the northern half)
 - Limited basic user amenities such as seating and trash receptacles, including multi-generational amenities along parts of the trail, especially the Northeast sections
- **Community engagement**
 - Limited representation of all demographics in previous community engagement efforts as compared to census data for community-wide demographics (this was witnessed by the Conservancy during the planning initiative throughout 2016-2019)
 - A need for more and deeper partnerships between the Conservancy and local organizations, schools, places of worship in diverse and low-income communities
 - Fewer existing trail users to engage in visioning and planning processes (see trail use counts below)
 - Language barriers (140+ languages spoken in Aurora)

Consequences of Barriers

The lack of investment in the Canal as a park and open space asset in the Northeast has translated to significant disparities in the use and safety of the Canal. It has also limited its ability to support and enhance community wellbeing and environmental health. The following outlines many of the consequences of these barriers.

- **Underutilized open space resource.** Contrasting the heavy use of the Canal in the southern suburbs, where Conservancy user counts have consistently recorded 50-100 users per hour on the trail, user counts in the Northeast typically range from 3-12 users per hour, with less than 10% of counts in these communities recording more than 20 users per hour. This disparity is stark when considering that the population density in Aurora and Denver is considerably higher than in the southern suburbs.



- Lower quality of user experience as evidenced by a lack of tree cover, seating, wayfinding signage, crossing safety and even trash cans as noted in Conservancy feedback data
- It is clear from previous data collected through public feedback that there is limited awareness of the Canal as a trail and open space and that the Canal is not perceived by all communities as:
 - A welcoming space
 - A safe space
 - A family space
- Limited participation in Conservancy/Canal programs by community members from the Northeast neighborhoods, including Black, Latino and immigrant community members. Volunteer participation in the Northeast can be as low as 10% of the southern communities and volunteer leadership has been limited.
- Limited community engagement with diverse populations, including diversity in race, ethnicity, age and ability; feedback has come from a high percentage of white, fully abled populations and often above 60.
- Due to higher rates of living in nature-deprived areas, these communities are receiving fewer ecological benefits such as air and water purification, climate change mitigation, biodiversity, disease control, and opportunities for leisure and recreation (Shea et al., 2020).
- Health inequities in the diverse communities of the Northeast, as indicated by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Community Health Equity Map (American Community Survey 2013-2017 averages), are paralleled by a historic lack of investment in parks and open space. The health crisis has laid bare the essential value of access to nature and open space, critical especially in these under-resourced communities where access to natural areas is associated with improved physical and mental health, increased physical activity and decreased stress and isolation.
- Poor environmental health of corridor and surrounding neighborhoods

ACTIONS + POSSIBILITIES

The Conservancy is committed to building equity within the organization, increasing activation and engagement, and improving the Canal's environmental health and infrastructure, aligned with local communities' needs and interest, specifically investing in Black, Latino and immigrant neighborhoods that make up the Northeast sections of the Canal through Denver and Aurora.

The following highlights the steps the Conservancy is taking to achieve equity as it relates to the organization, programs and physical improvement and enhancement of the Canal.

Internal/Organizational

Organizational equity for the Conservancy is defined as: Processes and decisions ensure all demographics are meaningfully represented in and have access to programming, planning, implementation, decision-making and leadership.

These are the steps the Conservancy is taking toward organizational equity:

- **Internal Task Force:** The Conservancy's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Task Force was formed in 2020 to strengthen an organizational commitment to equity and inclusion across race, sexual orientations, gender identities, socioeconomic status, and differing abilities. The Task Force makes informed recommendations to the staff and Board that will grow a representative Canal community, which have resulted in staff and Board equity trainings, the



development of an Equitable Impacts Framework with the High Line Network, diverse Board recruitment, revised staff work plans to prioritize DEIA.

- Board and committees that are representative of our Canal communities.
Progress: The Conservancy has added three African American Board members in the last 12 months, expanded geographic representation from across the 11 jurisdictions and continues to focus recruitment efforts on diversity and representation.
- Updating hiring practices and priorities to achieve a staff representative of and inclusive of all communities the Canal serves, including the hiring of a part-time employee from the Northeast to focus on community outreach and engagement in the Northeast.
- Northeast Steering Committee: To implement over 15 trail improvement projects along the Northeast sections of the Canal with substantial community participation, the Conservancy has established a NE steering committee to support a community feedback structure that will cultivate leadership and creative engagement for ongoing feedback on improvements, while inspiring local connections and programs.
Progress: In 2021, the Conservancy partnered with the High Line Network to develop an Equitable Impacts Framework that established recommendations and a work plan for the Northeast Steering Committee. Also in 2022, the Conservancy secured funding to hire a local community engagement team that is rooted in the Northeast as well as funding for compensation to committee participants.
- Strategic Plan: The Conservancy will update its five-year strategic plan to ensure diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility goals and accountability metrics are centered throughout the Conservancy's work.

Programmatic

Programmatic equity is defined as: Conservancy programs, planning and engagement that are rooted in and accessible to the community where programs and improvements are taking place.

These are the steps the Conservancy is taking toward programmatic equity:

- Increase Conservancy and community leadership capacity.
Progress: In 2019, the Conservancy was awarded funding from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Resilient Communities to hire an intern focused on community outreach in the Northeast, in addition, the Conservancy has secured funding from the Beacon Foundation and GOCO Centennial Program to dedicate more internal and external resources to engagement efforts in the Northeast. In 2022, the Conservancy will hire a local community engagement specialist and community organizer(s) and commit funds to compensate participating community members monetarily for their time and travel.
- Employ and engage local Canal Ambassadors, including youth in the Northeast.
Progress: With GOCO Resilient Communities funding, the Conservancy is actively engaging Canal Ambassadors and Corps Leaders with paid opportunities to support the Canal through community outreach and stewardship.
- Engage with the Northeast communities to design and co-create Canal enhancements.
Progress: The Conservancy has initiated the first Canal Improvement Zone project thanks to early support from the Colorado Health Foundation, serving as the pilot project for a community- and equity-centered approach to implementation of Canal enhancements. Partnerships with local schools, Laredo Elementary and Hinkley H.S., Aurora Library, Aurora PROS and others has helped make this pilot a success.



- Steward the Canal through on-the-ground programs and the Canal Conservation Corps.
Progress: In 2020, the Conservancy was awarded a significant grant from Great Outdoors Colorado that supports paid opportunities for community members to engage in the stewardship of the Canal in the Northeast sections of the Canal and the development of a comprehensive stewardship plan that improves environmental resiliency.
- Develop practices and communications that honor the Canal’s full history.
- Increase Community Engagement through the following tactics:
 - Identify community leaders, partners and youth leaders
 - Identify barriers to engagement and co-create an inclusive and culturally relevant process
 - Involve community members in decision-making and determining goals and outcomes
 - Create a Northeast community steering committee representative of the local neighborhoods
 - Convene and engage diverse community groups
 - Grow and strengthen partnerships with local organizations
 - Empower and train Canal and Youth Ambassadors to host local programs
 - Lead targeted community events and Canal walks.

Progress: Within the Laredo Highline neighborhood alone, which represents just one of more than 15 registered neighborhoods in the Northeast, the Conservancy has recruited 14 Canal Ambassadors, including eight youth since 2020. These community members, both paid and volunteer, help to create deeper connections to the community, gather input on projects and help build awareness about the Canal. In addition, the Conservancy has initiated partnerships with ELK Youth Council, GOCO Generation and Groundwork Denver to be involved in community engagement efforts for 14 improvement projects prioritized over the next five years.

Canal/Physical improvements

Canal equity is defined as: Investing the necessary resources into trail sections and communities along all 71-miles to ensure accessibility, environmental resilience and high quality of life and user experience for all Canal users.

The Plan brings life to the community vision to honor, enhance and repurpose this landmark of our agricultural heritage with over \$130M in recommended capital improvements over 15 years and a framework to meet the evolving maintenance needs of the corridor. Over 60% of this investment is prioritized for the 28-mile stretch of the Canal in Denver, Aurora and unincorporated Arapahoe County, collectively referred to as the Northeast. In the Northeast, historic inequities are apparent, and support to deepen engagement and community partnerships to co-design enhancements while accelerating implementation is critical.

The Conservancy holds an inspired mission to ensure all communities along the Canal engage in and co-lead the design of enhancements that will sustain the Canal as a central part of each community’s park, recreation and natural open space system. However, with a challenge of 28 miles of trail corridor spanning 15 neighborhoods, combined with historic underinvestment in capital improvements and maintenance of the corridor, the Conservancy has struggled to achieve the needed level of inclusive community engagement to date. Over the next five years, the Conservancy will lead over \$11 million of investment into the enhancement of the Canal in partnership with local governments.



Progress: In 2022, the Conservancy will initiate a planting pilot with ethno-botanicals in Denver, work with Groundwork Denver and Mile High Youth Corps on stewardship, planning and community engagement efforts, develop Design Guidelines for Northeast improvements to help accelerate enhancements, and prototype improvements across the trail in the Northeast.

Accountability / Metrics

The Conservancy measures impact through a quarterly dashboard that tracks project progress, program and engagement participation, Board representation, reach and more. The Conservancy is currently updating these metrics to incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion more explicitly.