



Statewide Planning Grant Case Study

Washington D.C.

*Creating an Economic Recovery Plan
with a Focus on Diversity, Equity, and
Inclusion*

Key Takeaways

- Washington D.C. used its planning dollars to conduct a highly effective planning process that focused on addressing opportunity gaps for the District’s disadvantaged residents and neighborhoods.
- The Statewide Planning Grant enabled Washington D.C. to perform a deep level of stakeholder engagement and data analysis that it otherwise could not afford.
- The resultant economic development strategy – *the D.C. Comeback Plan* – benefitted from a highly successful stakeholder engagement effort as well as from strong alignment with the District’s existing planning processes.

Introduction

The District of Columbia’s Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) capitalized on the \$1 million Statewide Planning Grant to undertake a comprehensive update of its economic development strategy with an explicit focus on uplifting the district’s economically disadvantaged residents. Advancing socioeconomic equity has long been a priority of Mayor Muriel Bowser’s administration, but the district has struggled to find the capacity to undertake a comprehensive planning effort toward equitable economic development. The Planning Grant provided the opportunity to develop a district-wide economic development strategy – the *D.C. Comeback Plan* – that focuses on recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of supporting economic mobility of DC residents.

Project Summary

Every five years, the District of Columbia updates its economic development strategy as a means of identifying challenges and opportunities, setting goals and priorities, guiding action and investments, and aligning stakeholders to achieve a shared vision. The timing of the Planning Grant coincided with the district’s 2023 update, and the \$1 million in planning funds enabled DMPED to conduct a much more comprehensive planning process than it would have otherwise. Using Planning Grant resources, the district completed an extensive stakeholder engagement process that involved a range of community and neighborhood organizations as well as in-depth data collection and analysis on a variety of socioeconomic metrics. As such, DMPED was able to institute a stakeholder-driven planning

“Our office has come to realize, certainly in the last few years during the pandemic, that economic development is much broader than our traditional focus on job creation, tax revenue growth, and affordable housing. This plan comes out of collaborative discussions with many stakeholders about things like childcare, neighborhood investments, broadband access, and other factors that deepen disparities between the District’s residents”

- Washington D.C. Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development

process that yielded actionable insights on challenges and opportunities and with a strong focus on socioeconomic equity among the district’s neighborhoods and residents.

The *DC Comeback Plan* takes a broad and holistic approach to the district’s economic development. By spending a considerable amount of time and resources on stakeholder engagement, DMPED sought to address the district’s most salient challenges in a way that increases socioeconomic mobility for disadvantaged residents and neighborhoods. These efforts culminated in six broad goals, each accompanied by actionable initiatives, that further DC’s vision of being “a city where every neighborhood offers its residents, of all races and genders, the chance to achieve their full potential”:

- 1) Create 35,000 New Jobs in High-Growth Sectors,
- 2) Increase Share of Minority-Owned Businesses,
- 3) Eliminate Key Amenity Gaps Across All Neighborhoods,
- 4) Add 15,000 Residents to the Downtown Population,
- 5) Retain Current Residents and Reach a Population of 725,000, and
- 6) Increase Median Income of Black Households by \$25,000.

As such, each goal has its roots in or is associated with an equity issue. For example, DC’s rising cost of living, which has caused many lower-income residents to leave the city and endure longer commutes to job opportunities, is one rationale for the plan’s resident retention and attraction goals. Ensuring equitable access to economic opportunities in underserved communities, in turn, is central to the goals of increasing minority-owned businesses, eliminating amenity gaps, and increasing the incomes of Black households. In implementing these goals, DMPED strives to ensure that underserved communities also benefit from the district’s economic recovery.

Alignment Spotlight

While the District of Columbia does not have Economic Development Districts, it is comprised of a large and diverse mix of neighborhoods. As part of DMPED’s stakeholder engagement process, staff and consultants went to great lengths to learn about the issues and priorities in each neighborhood and to work with neighborhood representatives to find opportunities for strategic alignment. For DMPED ensuring support and buy-in from neighborhoods across the district was a crucial priority throughout the planning process.

To help illustrate the challenges and opportunities that the district shares with its neighborhoods, DMPED took a data-based storytelling approach that highlighted existing disparities in residents' access to opportunity. According to DMPED staff, engaging neighborhoods and residents through data-based storytelling was incredibly successful in mobilizing widespread support for the diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) priorities in the plan that was eventually developed, as it helped residents visualize the nature and scale of disparities between neighborhoods and demographic groups. For instance, DMPED used a variety of maps to show stakeholders that many residents in eastern DC neighborhoods live in food deserts, lack reliable broadband access, and are challenged to find affordable housing. Data-based storytelling also conveyed the nature and scale of other issues, such as the district's shortage of residential housing, and enabled stakeholders to propose their own solutions on how to address these challenges.



Source: [DC's District Comeback Plan 2023](#)

Roadblocks and Areas for Improvement

DMPED did not face significant roadblocks with the project. At times, however, DMPED and its consultants found it difficult to balance the comprehensive nature of its stakeholder engagement process with the project timing constraints set forth by EDA and with internal deadlines. Nevertheless, DMPED was able to complete the *D.C. Comeback Plan* on schedule.

Federal Linkages

Washington D.C.'s project relied on the entirety of its Statewide Planning Grant as well as funds from the District's own budget. The *D.C. Comeback Plan* was a multi-million dollar initiative whose ambitious scope was made possible by the additional funding from the Statewide Planning Grant. Indeed, DMPED credits the success of the project to the flexibility with which EDA enabled the District to use the grant funds. Staff stressed that there are insufficient funds across the federal, state, and local levels to enable jurisdictions to undertake planning processes that are comprehensive, high-quality, and impactful. Good planning requires substantial investment in time

and resources to ensure effective stakeholder engagement and alignment of strategic priorities. As such, DMPED emphasized that additional future funding for planning-related work can be highly effective in advancing and coordinating equitable economic development across the United States.

Lessons Learned

Washington D.C.'s project offers several useful lessons for future recipients of Federal planning dollars:

- Effective stakeholder engagement that generates buy-in from all involved is critical to project success. Despite the amount of time and effort required, DMPED and its consultants engaged with each neighborhood in the District in order to develop a truly inclusive economic development strategy
- DMPED found that its approach to data-based storytelling, which included the use of innovative visualization and mapping techniques, was highly effective both in generating support for the project and in eliciting ideas from stakeholders.
- Washington D.C.'s project benefited from strong alignment with the District's existing planning process. Because DMPED already intended to update the District's economic development strategy, it was able to combine pre-allocated funds from the District's own budget with the Statewide Planning Grant to dramatically expand the scale, scope, and impact of the planning process.

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