



Racial Equity Toolkit Summary Sheet

Department: Seattle Public Utilities

Issue Area Analyzed: RainWise (Rebates for rain gardens & cisterns on private property)

Team that led this RET process: Tasha Bassett, Tom Gannon, Bill Malatinsky, Bob Spencer, and consultant support from Environmental Coalition of South Seattle (ECOSS) & Enviroissues

Date of RET process: Q1-Q3 2019

This Summary Sheet should be completed by those who worked on this RET with input from Change Team members and department leadership. Representatives from these different groups should review the final version so that there is consensus on content before it is shared with the Mayor's Office. For questions about using this Summary Sheet, please contact your SOCR RSJI liaison.

Please respond to the following questions in a separate document (no more than 2.5 pages) and include this page as the cover sheet along with your response.

1. What issues area did you apply the RET on? (project, program, policy, or budgetary decision)

RainWise is a 10-year-old Seattle Public Utilities program that provides rebates for property owners to install rain gardens and cisterns on private parcels. Its original intent was to partner with homeowners to, with dispersed solutions, reduce combined sewer overflows in certain drainage basins where overflows were prevalent. King County became a partner in the program in 2013. The RainWise RET focused on the two essential areas of the program, which are customer-relationship-based, and the program's interaction and reliance on small business owner landscape professionals to design and construct these installations.

2. What was your north star? What racial equity outcomes guided your thinking (Step 1)? How did you design and facilitate a process that was rooted in relational culture? (See the RSJI document, [Building a Relational Culture](#).)

Our north star was an accumulation of anecdotal evidence over the life of the program (informed by community, Utility staff, County staff, our consultant, and community-based partners) that the foundational structures of RainWise present a number of challenges, including the exclusion of:

- historically underserved populations
- small business owners (who perform 100% of RainWise installations)

Our goal was to deeply examine these unintended but rooted inequities and transform our program into one that is accessible and beneficial to BIPOC communities.



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Racial equity outcomes that guided our thinking included increased contracting equity, immigrant & refugee access to services, and inclusive outreach and public engagement. Equitable development, environment, and service equity were also essential guideposts.

Our process was not designed with tenets of relational culture in mind but did result in reflections of it. The main parts of our practice included two listening sessions, one with an English-speaking contractor cohort, and another with a Mandarin cohort. Significant customer feedback was gathered through telephone interviews. Those occurred one-on-one and were administered, mainly, by CBO professionals, in English, Spanish, Sinhalese, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

In these ways, tenants of shared leadership were critical, as well as the recognition of the multiplicity of wisdoms and realities. There was also, for the most part, a respect for real talk and resilience through conflict. There was no shortage of difficulty and hard conversations prior to and during the RET process and memo completion. Most of those were handled with grace and the assumption that each individual was committed to representing their authentic selves in the process, as well as on a journey of learning, and open and honest despite discomforts.

3. What data, stories, and communities did you engage with? What relationships did you develop, sustain, or deepen during this process? How did these relationships contextualize your institutional objective? (Step 2)

For administrators of a program like RainWise, whose success relies almost entirely on the relationship between private, non-Utility parties, it is easy to lose touch with the essential questions, barriers, motivations, and day-to-day realities of what it takes to actually get an installation in the ground – not to mention the roadblocks for those who either cannot participate or have tried but been unable to access the program’s potential benefits. The conversation with and reflections of both customers and contractors on the user side resulted in lending critical voice to how structures put in place a decade ago interact and challenge the very individuals and environment our program aims to lift up.

4. How did these relationships help you to identify the burdens and benefits of your proposed work? What are the burdens? What are the benefits? (Step 3)

Much of what we heard were stories, deeper and more personal, that underscored anecdotal evidence of inherent RainWise inequities. The aim of the program is noble, an alleviation of pressure on City infrastructure (especially as climate impacts increase) and decreased pollutant release into local waterways (benefits). However, that is not the first lens through which much of our audience looks, and for good reason. A program that relies on partnership with landowners is by nature exclusive (burdens). A program that is only available in parts of the city that, for a multitude of reasons, tend to be whiter and wealthier, must be questioned, whether or not we institutionally believe our hands to be tied in that regard. Rather than rest in defense



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of the critical Utility mandate achieved through a community program, we must reflect on leading with community benefit first, and creatively achieve the system benefit secondarily.

5. Please identify the way in which the four types of racism (internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural) animated your RET process and what you learned. (Step 3)

By and large, as stated in question 4, it is very comfortable, and possibly defensible, to fall back on the attitude that laws, policies, codes and other institutional systems prevent us from taking bold actions that benefit underserved communities because they might test the limits of legal mandates. However, that can perpetuate institutional racism as staff with inherent power in hand are able to quickly and easily voice a dismissive attitude of, “our hands are tied,” when presented with important questions such as who is really and truly benefiting from a given program. It will be an ongoing challenge for program staff to examine these perceived structural limitations and have the will and stamina to push back against what might, at first blush, seem bureaucratically impossible.

6. As a result of the above analysis, how will you increase opportunity and/or minimize harm for the impacted community? (Step 4)

Our immediate tasks and programmatic recommendations are numerous. But our main mandates daylighted through this process include the following: we must expand the service area of who is eligible for RainWise rebates however we can. We must increase the rebate allowance and pay the rebates more quickly. We must relieve the federal tax burden receiving a rebate places on a household. Lastly, we must find ways for this program to benefit more than single-family homeowners.

7. What steps will the RET team take to ensure that department leadership will implement the recommendations from the RET?

This process has begun with an initial RainWise RET memo presentation to SPU Drainage and Wastewater line of business leadership. It continues with the establishment of consultant and SPU staff workplans that reflect work tasks raised in the memo. Additional presentations at equity roundtables also hold our community accountable and drive us to hold ourselves accountable to this work.

8 How will you become/remain accountable to the relationships developed during the RET process? How will you report back to your stakeholders?

We have sent around the completed RET documents to our audience of partners who both helped in the process and will be responsible for partnering with us in pursuit of these equity objectives. We have attempted to organize and compile a list of RET immediate tasks and recommendations against responsible party and specific project and have recently presented



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that at a program-wide meeting. Admittedly, we need to strategize more thoroughly around our plans for remaining accountable to our community stakeholder participants.

- 8. What additional racial equity issues did this RET reveal? Consider how these unresolved issues present opportunities for structural transformation, including [building a relational culture](#) (i.e., working across departments, and with other institutions and sectors to achieve racial equity).**

It is worth reemphasizing that balance between Utility goals, permit requirements, boundaries of drainage basins, infrastructure protection and resiliency needs, etc. pose interesting intersections with community needs, historically underserved audiences, equity, displacement trends, affordability, and laws concerning the proper use of ratepayer funds. Institutional and systemic strictures often do pose real barriers on an individual and programmatic level.

To be empowered at a staff level to deliver true service equity will take continued support of institutional change, thoughtful and compassionate leadership, and a true commitment to community voice at every level of the Utility. A cultural and mindset shift is required to move years of structural mountains. Happily, in some senses, the Utility has begun that transformation.

RainWise will soon be seeking funding for some of the bigger recommendations as listed in Question #6 above and presented within the RET summary memo. It is an excellent and fortunate position to be in, one that many programs do not have. It remains to be seen if those recommendations will be supported with both will and dollars. Lastly, for those ideas that require reinvention both political and legal shifts, that will take courage, creativity, and openness from many Utility levels and individual Utility staff.