

Environmental Justice (EJ) Council

DRAFT 2025-2027 Biennial Budget Recommendations

Draft for discussion at the November 21, 2024 EJ Council meeting.

This document has not been adopted by the Environmental Justice Council

14. Community Assemblies

Background and Rationale: The Just Futures project is a collaborative effort focused on creating a more just and equitable future for all Washingtonians, particularly for those who have been historically marginalized. In collaboration with the Economic Justice Alliance Team, a multiagency collaboration hosted by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), this effort has partnered ~~Through partnerships~~ with Just Futures member organizations like the People’s Economy Lab, Statewide Poverty Action Network (SPAN), and Front and Centered (FC), ~~and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), this year Just Futures is to pilot community assemblies over the past year, piloting the Frontline Community Assemblies across the state as a tactic of Collaborative Governance.~~ These assemblies are bringing together people with shared experiences to co-create solutions that improve and strengthen their communities. For example, Nuestra Casa outside of Yakima is gathering to discuss climate resilient agriculture while Blue Mountain Action Council is convening in Walla Walla to dive into the topic of wellness in the community.

Recognizing the deep connections between economic, environmental, climate, and social justice; climate resilience; and collaborative governance with communities—the Environmental Justice Council recommended (in both their 2024 and 2023 budget recommendations) funding Community Assemblies. The Council recommended this model as an investment in community capacity building to lift up the voices of those often left out of decision-making processes, giving them a real voice in shaping policies and programs that directly impact their lives. The Legislature and Governor funded the Frontline Community Assemblies Initiative through \$2,000,000 provided to DSHS in the 2025 Supplemental Operating Budget (section 208[9]) to

elevate community expertise and solutions to budget and policy makers on sustainable investments to create a more climate resilient Washington. The funding in FY 2025 built on the prior work of the Economic Justice Alliance hosted by DSHS, including their development of a community assemblies model co-created by Washington communities. [With funding from DSHS, supported by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant dollars, and in anticipation of CCA dollars to pilot community assemblies, from January to July 2024, Just Futures community partners and the Economic Justice Alliance Team also worked to deepen a shared commitment to equitable and transparent data practices. This collaboration led to the June 27th 'Data from the Frontlines' convening, where Just Futures partners shared a data framework and logic model, and engaged in discussions with community and government partners to discuss ways to ensure that communities maintain ownership over their data and narratives while shaping policies that reflect their lived realities.](#)

Community Assemblies already underway across the state are demonstrating the transformative potential of this model in realigning power to drive systemic change from the ground up. The impact will be tangible; building a governance structure that is more responsive, equitable, and resilient--where public resources are allocated in ways that reflect the true priorities of the people. However, to realize that vision the work needs a substantial investment, both in the administration of collaborative governance and resources to support implementation of community driven proposals.

Proposal: Provide ~~\$5,000,000~~ [\\$5,500,000](#) for the 2025-2027 biennium to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to: ~~continue~~ [1\) expand](#) the Frontline Community Assemblies infrastructure currently being piloted by the Just Futures project, [2\) resource additional entities to lead other forms of participatory governance, 3\) and resource community compensation for participants.](#) [Acknowledging the deep work described above that the Just Futures community collaborative has done around equitable and transparent data practices in 2024, the Environmental Justice Council recommends that \\$500,000 of this is dedicated to the development of model protocols on Free Prior and Informed Consent, data sovereignty, and](#)

protection of community and traditional knowledge in continued collaboration with Tribes and tribal serving organizations and frontline communities. Each organization receiving funds should work with assembly participants to adapt and approve these model protocols in advance of gathering information. The Council's recommendation for funding sets both the general and specific expectation that DSHS and funding recipients will conduct their community related work in ways consistent with the values and principles for community engagement enunciated by the Council Community Engagement Committee and formally adopted by the Environmental Justice Council on August 25, 2023.

These assemblies center ~~historically~~ overburdened communities, ~~and~~ involving vulnerable populations and historically excluded communities to elevate community-led solutions in state government policy, program, and funding decision-making processes. The continued support of the Economic Justice Team at DSHS is critical in providing administration of pass-through grants and providing technical expertise.

In addition, the EJC acknowledges that we have not engaged more broadly with Tribes to understand if they would want funding to do this type of work. Knowing this, the Council recommends that the Governor and Legislature be responsive to requests from any Tribe for funding to develop and do this type of work in addition to the \$5,500,000 requested above.

15. Environmental Justice Fund

Background and Rationale: The implementation of the HEAL Act and investments in overburdened communities and Tribes have highlighted the challenges that a two-year budget cycle creates in making sustainable investments that uplift community and Tribal priorities and make meaningful changes on the ground. Community and Tribally-led solutions and ingenuity rooted in community and Tribal knowledge and expertise are essential to building wellness and resilience to climate change and to realizing environmental, climate, and economic justice. Building capacity for community participatory processes requires time, trust-building, and

reliable and sustainable funding—all factors that are not supported by the biennial budget cycle.

For example, based on an EJ Council recommendation, the Legislature provided funding in the 2023-2025 biennial budget for community participatory budgeting. While the EJ Council and communities were so appreciative of this investment, the one-time funding, the biennial timeline, and a requirement that the Legislature approve projects before the Department of Health (DOH) could execute contracts for project funding were all significant barriers for implementation. In FY24, DOH gained internal capacity for this innovative budgeting strategy, convened a community advisory committee to identify and select priority communities, and conducted Tribal Consultation. Unfortunately, with less than a year left in FY25, there is not enough time for communities to go through the participatory project selection process, the Legislature to approve projects (which would need to happen when the Legislature convenes in 2025), and for DOH to execute contracts to fund project implementation, which could take years to complete, particularly for any capital projects.

These challenges could be mitigated by the creation of an Environmental Justice Fund, which: 1) carves out funding that Tribes and communities can depend on, 2) allows flexibility for spending across biennia so that processes and prioritization can be truly community-led, and 3) allows flexibility in spending (including both operating and capital costs) to ensure investments meet both requirements for state spending and uplift community expertise, priorities, and solutions. Ideally, an Environmental Justice Fund will also include mechanisms to allow smaller community-based organizations to receive up-front costs, rather than relying on a reimbursement model, which is another significant challenge that communities have shared with the Council and state agencies.

Proposal: Develop an Environmental Justice Fund/Account that creates a mechanism to: 1) supports implementation of multiple forms of community participatory processes to build capacity for meaningful civic engagement, collaborative governance, and community-led

prioritization and 2) funds ~~project both~~ capital projects and operating costs identified by Tribes and communities. The Environmental Justice Fund should ~~provide enable~~ reliable and timely funding, flexible timelines that can span multiple biennia, and flexible spending to ensure investments meet both requirements for state spending and uplift community expertise, priorities, and solutions. In order to support projects across HEAL and other agencies, the Environmental Justice Fund should not be managed by one agency or limited to a single agency's program and should create a more enterprise-level approach. The administrating body should be led by frontline Tribes & communities. Criteria and tracking mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that funds are equitably distributed.

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