

Case Study: Duwamish Valley Resilience District

11.308/4.213 Ecological Urbanism Seminar

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1. **Title:** Duwamish Valley Resilience District
2. **Location and Dates of Operation:** South Park, Seattle, WA 2018-2023
3. **Abstract and Keywords:** Climate change, urban expansion, rising inequalities, and aging infrastructure (among other things) have raised the concerns of many local governments in the face of mounting fiscal pressures and the need to improve “resilience” to these threats. A number of cities have proposed the establishment of “resilience districts” as a potential governance mechanism to address these complex, interrelated challenges. Modeled on the principles of utility and service districts, resilience districts are broadly intended to (1) structure a *collective decision-making framework* to identify what strategies should be pursued and (2) provide a vehicle for securing finances for paying for those decisions. A resilience district strategy is proposed for the Duwamish Valley communities of South Park and Georgetown in Seattle which will build on and complement Seattle Public Utility’s (SPU) past and ongoing work with the community to design drainage and water management infrastructure. Foremost on the minds of community and City planners involved in the project is evidence of displacement due to rising rent and the prospect of higher land value associated with green infrastructure. The resilience district strategy aims to mitigate displacement risk, promote racial equity, build community wealth, and establish a shared decision-making framework.
4. **Philosophy/Mission/Values:** Community wealth building, community stabilization, self-determination, economic opportunity and jobs
5. **Size of Community:** Residential and industrial areas of Georgetown and South Park with just under 30,000 residents.
6. **Timeline:** In 2018, as part of a broader planning effort in the City of Seattle to address sea level rise and social equity, the Duwamish Valley Action Plan (part of the Duwamish Valley Program led by the Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment) was developed in partnership between City agencies and local community organizations in South Park and Georgetown. The Action Plan identified place-specific strategies and an implementation process. The idea for a resilience district strategy was identified during this effort through conversations between SPU, the Office of Sustainability and Environment, and recommendations by a ULI panel. The resilience district framework will help to structure decisions regarding SPU’s ongoing investments in the community alongside community power/wealth building and anti-displacement programs. Currently, the establishment of the resilience district is still in the early stages and its formulation and functions will be determined through extensive community-based participation over the next few years with the goal to form a “community entity” by the end of 2023.
7. **Organization and Operation:** In support of implementation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded Seattle a \$600,000 grant to work with community partners in Duwamish Valley on building resilience. Leading this effort, the SPU (with an interdisciplinary team of 18 city departments including the Office of Housing, King County Flood Control District, King County, and the Port of Seattle) will work with the broader community to establish an as-yet undefined decision-making framework (via a “community entity”) to manage the needs and goals of a wide array of residents, businesses, and other stakeholders. The final form of the community entity is as yet to be determined, but could take the form of a community land trust, a community

development organization, a quasi-public governance organ, or any number of different arrangements.

8. **Programs:** Given that the resilience district emerged from a broader planning effort, there are parallel projects in the pipeline with more possible in the future. For example, the Duwamish Waterway Park Expansion will help to establish sea level rise adaptation infrastructure along South Park Reach. In addition to physical projects, other deliverables include: sea level rise adaptation strategy (including additional meetings and scenario modeling), value capture mechanisms and equitable investment tools, cross-sector partnerships, proof of concept projects, inclusive residents' and business' engagement, policies and legislation. This also includes the establishment of a community entity (i.e. a Public Development Authority or a Community Development Corporation, or something else) that builds on the participation and decision-making of local residents and businesses, with a focus on Black, Indigenous, people of color, and low-income individuals.
9. **Financing and Resources:** The initiative is currently funded through philanthropic sources (not funded through city budget). It has been recorded that the broader Duwamish Valley Program 2.0 will bring in "hundreds of millions of dollars." The aim of current efforts is to identify sustainable funding mechanisms (like value capture) and other equitable investment mechanisms to help prevent the displacement of impacted communities.
10. **Assessment:** The outcomes are difficult to measure as this is only the second year of planning following the development of the Duwamish Valley Action Plan in 2018 and COVID-19's disruption. Clearer information may be available as community meetings progress towards the establishment of the community entity.
11. **Lessons for West Philadelphia:** The planned resilience district and associated community entity could be a useful tool to build community power within the current highly-centralized municipal structure of Philadelphia. However, a community entity should be judged based on its powers and functions. Developing a sustainable source of funding is a key problem. But current efforts at participatory budgeting may point to a potential democratization framework for the distribution of city funds directly to community entities or at least accountability mechanisms for promoting equity and political empowerment.

References

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