

Renton Builds an Inclusive City, One Step at a Time

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Pictured above: Members of the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force

Situated 11 miles southeast of Seattle, Renton is the 8th largest city in Washington and the home of such diverse businesses as Boeing's Commercial Airplanes Division and Kaiser Permanente, and as any fan of Scandinavian furniture knows, the location of the only IKEA store in the state.

Renton experienced a dramatic 82% increase in growth from 2000-2010, one that included a remarkable increase in the ethnic diversity of its population. Today, Renton, like its neighbors Bellevue, Federal Way and Kent, is becoming a minority-majority city.

Residents from minority groups, especially those who speak a language other than English at home, are typically less engaged in the civic process and in government and are less likely to access information and services that the city provides. They are at a higher risk of being disproportionately affected by disasters and are more susceptible to inequalities and discrimination. They also need to be more effectively engaged in efforts to promote common local government concerns such as crime prevention and emergency preparedness.

A change in population leads to action

The growth of Renton's minority populations (up 165% from 2000-2010) was a major "wake-up" call for city staff and elected leadership. In recognition of these changing demographics, top city officials, including Mayor Denis Law, proposed "Building an Inclusive City," an initiative that would ensure all constituents have equal access to city services and equal opportunity for civic engagement.

After the effort won the support of Renton councilmembers, the mission statement in the city's strategic business plan was revised to include inclusion and diversity and the following goals were added:

- Improve access to city services, programs, and employment
- Make residents and businesses aware of opportunities to be involved with their community
- Build connections with all communities that reflect the breadth and richness of the city's diversity
- Promote understanding and appreciation of the city's diversity through celebrations and festivals
- Provide critical and relevant information on a timely basis and facilitate 2-way dialogue between city government and the community

To achieve its ambitious goals, the city began a 2-pronged effort: reaching out to minority and under-represented groups and assessing its own internal capabilities regarding inclusion.

External focus: Promoting a diverse and unified community

The city adopted an innovative approach to connect with the various ethnic, cultural, and other diverse community groups. In 2008, it created a network of community leaders to represent these groups and act as a liaison between their communities and the city. A few years ago, this network evolved into the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force, which currently includes over 30 individuals representing the following communities: African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Indians, Sikhs, Somalis, Vietnamese, Sudanese, Filipino, Latinos, Ukrainians, LGBT, Senior, and Muslim faith groups. Renton elected officials also serve on the task force and the Mayor leads it.

The full task force meets about five times yearly, but subcommittees work on specific priorities year-round, such as planning and hosting community dialogues and forums, and planning festivals/events that celebrate Renton's changing face. This includes well-known events that were created only two years ago: the Unity March, held in mid-October, which is a collaboration between the city, the police department, and the Renton African-American Pastoral Group; and the Renton Multicultural Festival, held in late September, which is a 2-day music and arts festival and was recently covered on the [King 5 Evening news program](#).



The Unity March

In addition to working with members of the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force, the city has also expanded access to city services through other channels and partnerships. Since 2008 the city has focused on educating diverse communities about emergency preparedness. City workers have provided training to various community groups, translated an emergency preparedness video into four different languages (and distributed these to non-English speaking households), and distributed emergency preparedness kits to community liaisons, who, in turn, taught other community members how to create similar kits.

Similarly, as part of Renton's Heart Month the city's Fire & Emergency Services Department partnered with a Sikh Temple, St. Antony's Catholic Parish (frequented by members of the Latino community), and various other faith-based organizations in the city to provide free blood sugar and blood pressure screenings to community members as they gathered at these sites. Working through ethnic media outlets (newspapers, radio stations, and the local Hispanic TV station), the city targeted minority communities with tailored outreach and messaging to educate and engage residents about the initiative, including publicizing information about its successes, upcoming events, and ways to get involved.

Internal focus: A workforce that understands and values diversity

In order to go beyond the external focus and ‘integrate diversity at every level of the city government,’ Renton hired a consultant with a background on equity and social justice. The initiative was made part of the Executive Department and fell under the coordination of the city’s Deputy Public Affairs Administrator.

One of the first priorities for consultant was to provide a thorough and unbiased assessment of the city’s strengths and weaknesses, including reviewing key policies and practices. Beginning in 2014, the city provided annual training to all employee in structural and institutional racism and implicit bias.



An Inclusion Workshop

It also developed the Renton Equity Lens, a tool for staff to use in evaluating whether a particular policy or practice would advance inclusion and minimize unanticipated adverse consequences.

Concurrently, the city conducted targeted recruiting efforts to diverse communities. In partnership with the Renton School District and other organizations, it held different career day/job fairs that focused on public sector jobs.



A job fair

Today, the city has a workforce of 526, of which 16.9% are members of an ethnic minority. The 7-member city council includes two women and an African American. Key citizen task forces such as the Budget Advisory Group, Parks Task Force, and Renton Municipal Arts Commission include representatives from diverse, ethnic-minority communities.

Making inclusion “business as usual”

While the city’s current budget includes money for the equity consultant, prior to 2017 consultant costs were covered through savings in the executive budget. Further, because many of the activities the city has undertaken as part of this initiative — community outreach, emergency preparedness, employee recruitment — are what it normally engages in, those costs have also been factored into existing programs and services.

In a [2015 interview with Alliance for Innovation](#), Renton's Chief Administrative Officer Jay Covington attributed the initiative’s success to a broad-based commitment to inclusion, both within city government and the community. His advice to others was that city leadership, in particular, must champion the effort, noting: “If you are totally committed, you will find ways for the goal of inclusion to permeate into everything you do.”



Attendees enjoy the dragon dance during the Renton Multicultural Festival

Questions? Comments?

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About Leah LaCivita

Leah joined MRSC as a Communications Coordinator in the fall of 2016 and manages MRSC's blog and webinar training program, in addition to developing website content.