

Grand River Equity Framework

February 2023 | *Executive Summary* | Final Draft



Grand River Equity Framework Stakeholder Advisory Board Statement of Endorsement

February 2023

We, the undersigned members of the Grand River Equity Framework Stakeholder Advisory Board, unanimously endorse the following Equity Framework document. For the past eight months, we have actively overseen its community engagement process, its content creation, and its drafting. We confidently state this document is a community-led, credible, and implementable strategy for achieving greater regional equity in conjunction with pending investments into the Grand River Corridor.

Opportunity is often disguised. It can be undiscovered, undernourished, or impeded by decades or centuries of unequal or unjust conditions. Opportunity gaps can be justified and exacerbated by long-standing cultural and economic biases. Candidly, Western Michigan has a history of such conditions and biases. A racial and economic equity strategy is an intentional policy intervention to acknowledge historic inequities, begin a healing process, and mitigate current disparities by adopting measures intended to broaden opportunity and outcomes across all communities. In the context of river revitalization, it also seeks environmental justice. An equitable investment in the Grand River means investing in the underinvested, catalyzing not just a physical and ecological transformation, but a social transformation as well.

This framework document sets forth a vision and values, as well as goals and strategies, for the Greater Grand Rapids community to adopt and implement. It does not pick winners and losers – neither anointing specific places, projects or

organizations, nor proposing a budget. But it does set forth community-defined goals across six broad categories: Equitable Economic Development; An Accessible River; An Inviting, Inclusive River; A Healthy River; Engaged, Supported Youth; and Implementation and Accountability. The framework relies upon local stakeholders to endorse, adopt, and act upon the stated vision and goals. This hard work lies in front of us.

As an advisory board, we proudly represent a cross-section of the river community. We were selected to serve in a public and transparent process. We represent various geographies, cultures, professions, and interests that intersect with the Grand River. We are entrepreneurs and environmentalists, scientists and outdoor enthusiasts, activists and artists, urban planners and business chambers, funders and government staff. We are Black & Brown, White, Chippewa and Filipina, men and women, multilingual and multicultural, of various economic strata and residency. Simply put, we are authentic local stakeholders and the future users of a revitalized Grand River.

We strongly encourage you and your organizations to co-endorse this River Equity Framework and take action to help bring its vision to life. Without broad public endorsement of an equity framework, combined with transparency and accountability measures designed to continuously improve the process, West Michigan will continue to limit opportunity and repeat past mistakes as we revitalize our river.

Sincerely, the Grand River Equity Framework Stakeholder Advisory Board.



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Note: Organizational affiliations are for purposes of context only. Endorsements are of the individual.

Executive Summary

The Grand River restoration effort proposes to bring ecological, economic, and cultural activity back into and around our waterway. By all signals, the accelerating interest in river revitalization will result in a significant and sustained investment in the region. The revitalization initiative presents a once-in-a-generation for chance Grand Rapids and Kent County – a window to ensure future river-related programming, policies, and infrastructure benefit all local residents. It can focus on the unmet needs of those that have been disproportionately impacted by racial, environmental, or economic injustices. Just as the Grand River has flowed and nurtured indigenous communities for millenia, and birthed the city of Grand Rapids 200 years ago, it can once again catalyze opportunity and healing in modern day.

The call for shared benefit can no longer be ignored. The COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic recession, and our country's ongoing racial reckoning have brought matters of equity to the forefront of local and national conversation. West Michigan has been part of that conversation and laudable efforts to build a thriving community offering opportunity for all. But without a shared understanding of what "equity" means in the context of river corridor revitalization, we risk misunderstanding each other, dividing our community, and working in unproductive silos. Without intentionally bringing equity priorities into our policymaking, the region risks perpetuating historic inequities, calcifying inequality, and squandering opportunities for broad-based economic growth as it

remakes its river for the next century.

The Grand River Equity Framework is a guiding document. It establishes a common understanding for river equity and uplifts thematic goals and strategies that create opportunity and equitable outcomes via revitalization efforts. The Framework should be used by residents, policymakers, advocates, city and county departments, philanthropy, businesses, and others guiding future investment and activity along the Grand River, its tributaries, and adjacent communities.

The Framework's content is community-sourced. It distills longstanding stakeholder input given over decades, and incorporates new feedback from this project's public engagement process. It will direct the work of an independent nonprofit, Grand River Network, that serves as a backbone agency facilitating implementation of the community's vision for a revitalized Grand River. The Framework also calls out strategies and actions that can be naturally undertaken by engaged nonprofits and community groups as part of values-aligned collective action. To be clear, the river equity agenda will require many partners working together to drive successful implementation.

The Framework is organized across six community-defined priorities, which we label as Goals. A Goal is *What the Community Wants*. Within each goal, a subset of more honed Strategies is proposed. A Strategy suggests *How We Get There*. At a topline, our Goals and Strategies are as follows:

Goal 1: Equitable Economic Development

- Create quality jobs and career pathways through river programs and policies
- Support the sustainability and expansion of small, local, and BIPOC businesses
- Leverage river-related policy to catalyze community economic development and stabilize neighborhoods

Goal 2: An Accessible River

- Improve and expand equitable connections to the river
- Create vibrant and open public spaces

Goal 3: An Inviting, Inclusive River

- Provide free and low-cost, culturally-relevant programming
- Create and sustain a safe, welcoming river

Within the full Equity Framework document, each of the Goals and Strategies is detailed with a set of recommended Actions that emerged from community input and stakeholder advisors. An Action proposes *What Specific Steps We Take*. The Framework also proposes Metrics that can be used to track progress. A Metric is *What We Should Measure Along the Way*. While the report overwhelmingly avoids naming specific projects, partners, or budgets, it does propose a series of Priority Outcomes that we uplift as worthy

Goal 4: A Healthy River and Community

- Continue to monitor water quality, restore habitat health, and incorporate green stormwater infrastructure
- Work with communities to continue advancing environmental justice

Goal 5: Engaged, Supported Youth

- Create opportunities for youth to explore and play
- Create opportunities for youth to learn and work
- Foster youth agency and leadership

Goal 6: Implementation and Accountability

- Invest in a dedicated nonprofit for the River Project
- Build broad endorsements for the River Equity Framework
- Build social infrastructure to support the river ecosystem, including an ongoing feedback loop, transparency, and accountability mechanisms

measures of progress. A Priority Outcome is *Our Community's Resolution to Improve*. The Framework's Priority Outcomes by Goal are listed on the following page.

We hope that readers find the document to be useful and inspirational. We also hope it serves as an authentic foundation for community-first framing of this important restoration and revitalization initiative.

Priority Outcomes: Equitable Economic Development

- Local hire goal of 30% of total work hours on City and County river contracts
- Targeted hire (BIPOC¹, low-income, and underemployed communities) goal of 20% of total work hours on all City and County river contracts
- Double the number of MLBEs² on the City and County bench in 24 months
- MLBE, WBE³, MBE⁴ or BIPOC spend goal of 30% of all City and County river contracts
- Integration of equity framework into City, County, township, and other planning documents
- Updated river planning overlays to codify key framework goals

Priority Outcomes: An Accessible River

- 40 miles of new bike lanes, off-street trails, and public transit connections to the river
- 1,000,000 unique river visitors by 2025, and an average of five (5) visits annually by Kent County residents
- 20% increase in active transportation and transit users accessing the river
- 100% of all undeveloped river's edge protected for public access
- New public shoreline access on previously inaccessible shoreline

¹ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. See Key Terms.

² Micro Local Business Enterprise

³ Women-owned Business Enterprise

⁴ Minority-owned Business Enterprise

- 50 acres of new and renovated riverfront park spaces in the urban core in 10 years
- 200 acres of new riverfront park spaces across Kent County in 10 years
- Provision or transfer of dedicated ceremonial river space for indigenous tribal communities
- 100% all redevelopment projects ADA-accessible and universally-designed

Priority Outcomes: An Inviting, Inclusive River

- 350 events at the river per year, with an emphasis on community and cultural themes
- 3,000 hours of measurable river activation annually
- Demographic breakdown of river event attendees that mirrors regional demographics
- 35 new educational, art, and safety installations along the shoreline by 2025
- Public Wellness facilities every half-mile along the river trail or bike path from Millennium to Riverside Park
- Annual riverfront cleanliness indices that show year-over-year (YOY) improvement
- 90% of all Kent County Youth aged 7-18 can swim, or have the opportunity to take (or have taken) a water-safety class
- Repeal of ordinance prohibiting swimming in the river as soon as health & safety conditions allow
- 100% of visitors feel safe and welcomed at the river

Priority Outcomes: A Healthy River and Community

- Production of a public river report card with water quality and other key indicies.
- Reintroduction of sturgeon to Grand River
- Reintroduction of native Grand River plants
- 40% tree canopy coverage along the river corridor
- All new public and private projects incorporate green stormwater infrastructure or traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) practice
- Actively enforced local, state, and federal laws to protect and promote clean water
- Partnerships with Southside communities to clean adjacent river and tributaries, achieving equity in regional water quality

Priority Outcomes: Engaged, Supported Youth

- 150 annual field trips to the river from low-income and communities of color
- Annual River Youth event planned by, and for, local youth
- Every student in Kent County takes a course on Environmental Studies that reviews concepts like stormwater, pollution, climate change, and ecosystem balance using the Grand River as a case study
- Deepen educational opportunities

via STEM Greenhouse, Grand Rapids Public Museum, GREEN, or equivalent programs

- 300 summer “river ambassador” or “river entrepreneur” internships for youth per year
- Creation of River Youth Advisory Council of diverse representation
- 10,000 river posts per year on youth-preferred social media
- “It’s my River” video competition

Priority Outcomes: Implementation and Accountability

- Investment in a diverse organization whose sole focus is the river project, which adopts the Equity Framework, and acts as advocate and implementer
- Endorsement of the Equity Framework by key municipalities, civic institutions, business leaders, community advocates, and general population
- Establishment of an independent stakeholder body to review progress on river equity goals and publicly issue findings and recommendations



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