

# Social Impact: A Case Study in Philadelphia's Newly Minted Redevelopment Metric

Jeremy Voorhees

Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA  
Temple University, Philadelphia, PA

**ABSTRACT:** Although the City of Philadelphia employs a catalogue of legal codes and laws to manage its urban growth, its inclusion of a "Social Impact" metric in a recent project is equally novel and vague. Opportunistically leveraging a prominent and sizable block, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority issued a Request for Proposals that required the developers to not only demonstrate how they would benefit the social fabric of the city, but provide metrics in order to do so.

While measuring social impact is fraught with difficulties, it shows a willingness of the city to scrutinize the effect of its architecture on the city as a whole. Over the past decade, Philadelphia has enacted drastic shifts in its urban planning protocols ranging from an overhaul of its zoning maps to a restructuring of property tax evaluation.

This paper will examine the first project to emerge from this process: a mixed use development that includes housing, a chain hotel, and the Equal Justice Center. It will describe the emergence of the social metric, position it among other current planning mechanisms aimed at equitable development, and speculate about its potential impact.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Impact, Urban Development, Philadelphia Redevelopment

## INTRODUCTION

On September 23, 2016, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority (PRA) launched its inaugural Request for Proposals featuring a new scoring metric, "Social Impact," for 800-30 Vine Street. The project site was a large undeveloped parcel adjacent to Philadelphia Police Department Headquarters and the historic Chinatown neighborhood. Given the size, significance, and zoning, the PRA strategically leveraged the potential for economic development to test its new scoring metric. Yet the parameters for that metric were not only vague, but intentionally absent. In truth, they asked the proposals themselves to demonstrate "[c]reativity in determining how to quantify these impact(s) and how outcomes are measured and tracked" (Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority 2016, 15).

The inclusion of the "Social Impact" metric signaled a shift in the manner the city dispenses its property and the criteria it chooses to employ. The scoring sheet for the 800 Vine Street RFP allotted 15% of the total evaluation to this new metric, whereas the Project's quality, connection to community, and timeline accounted for a total of 20% (Attachment K). While this percentage is significant, the substance and effect of this addendum is unclear.

The two resulting proposals projected radically different social agendas. One group worked with, and was vocally supported by, the neighboring Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation. The second group proposed a headquarters for the scattered network of community legal services organizations, in order to take advantage of the site's proximity to Police Headquarters. The first maintained a 6-story height limit and included a playground and urban farm. The second proposed a 14-story tower, hotel, and well-manicured landscaping. The first sought a systemic relationship between social impact and community while the second consolidated into a single partnership and building. The PRA ultimately selected the second.

The "Social Impact" metric is only the newest way the City of Philadelphia has attempted to support neighborhood stabilization, combat the effects of gentrification, and encourage equitable relationships between public space and private developments. To combat rising property taxes in gentrifying areas, the city began the Longtime Owner Occupants Program (LOOP), providing a tax discount to residents who have lived in their homes for more than 10 years. In another effort, the city apportioned a \$100 million dollar bond in May 2017 to restart a program providing repair loans for low- and middle-income homeowners. The aim is to prevent displacement and preserve neighborhoods, but it may also result in 1,000 new jobs and \$60-70 million

in economic impact. Such overt objectives and clear expectations stand in contrast to the current qualifications of social impact.

However, the majority of these existing devices and programs attempt to stabilize or preserve, making their potential effects more determinate. The “Social Impact” metric is the first to attempt to employ this device speculatively to promote new development.

This paper will outline the emergence of the new “Social Impact” metric to situate it in the context of Philadelphia’s recent urban development agendas. By comparing this metric to the existing host of urban planning mechanisms, it will interrogate the proposed project’s potential contribution to the social fabric of the city.

## **1.0 THE EMERGENCE OF THE SOCIAL IMPACT METRIC**

### **1.1. Philadelphia 2035 and the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority**

The Philadelphia 2035 plan is a multi-scaled urban plan coordinating infrastructure, sustainability, economic interests, and neighborhood stabilization and development. Adopted initially in 2011, the “Citywide Vision” laid the ground work for subsequent urban initiatives, and the planning process is still unfolding. Following the broad regional agendas initially adopted, district plans are constructed and adopted through community meetings involving relevant stakeholders.

This process marked a significant moment in the city’s planning process. At the same time as Philadelphia 2035 began, the city also significantly revised its zoning map and code (adopted in 2012) and undertook a comprehensive assessment of its property tax system (adopted in 2013). These initiatives came in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession and in response to the general conditions of disproportionate growth within the city’s disparate neighborhoods.

At the same time, the city began to examine the process by which it sold properties in order to streamline the holdings and protocols of the many city agencies. The city established the Philadelphia Land Bank in 2013 to consolidate the diverse set of lots and buildings owned by various city agencies and departments. However, significant parcels and buildings, including the sale of a number of closed Philadelphia school facilities, were managed by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority (PRA). That renewal agency was founded in the heyday of post-World War II federally funded urban planning projects and has been a significant instrument in the city’s development since.

The Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority authored the Request for Proposals for 800 Vine Street.

### **1.2. Social Impact as Defined by the Request for Proposals**

There is little precedent for the inclusion of a “Social Impact” measure in Philadelphia’s Requests for Proposals (RFPs). The Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority gave no clear indication for its inclusion specific to this individual parcel, nor did it announce it as a broader strategy. Within the purview of the PRA’s own protocols, the introduction of the social metric for 800 Vine Street did little to adjust the metrics from previous RFPs aside from changing their weighted impact. The evaluation Criteria outlined in the RFP are:

- 30% Financial: Bid Price, Financing Plan, Demonstration of Feasibility
- 20% Project: Concept Design Quality, Alignment with Local Community/Context, Timeline
- 20% Developer: History of Team Partnership, Track Records of Similar Projects and Partners
- 15% Social Impact: Measurable Impact, Creativity in Quantifying Impact
- 15% Economic Opportunity Plan: Minority, Women, Disabled Owned Business Support (AttachmentK)

As the criteria are consistent with previous RFPs, we can assume that while the introduction of such a device was novel, it was not intended to be revolutionary. While the general procedures and criteria of the city’s planning process remained unaffected, the social metric introduced here was meant to leverage the sale of specific parcels already determined to be economically viable enough to afford a modicum of social responsibility.

Though vague, Philadelphia included this definition of Social Impact in its inaugural RFP. The following is the complete description of the Social Impact section included in the *Request for Proposals 800-30 Vine Street*:

The development team should define the project's social impact within the narrative. Social impact refers to the way that a physical project can have a positive effect on people and communities. Respondents may engage a consultant to assist in developing an approach to impact assessment. Such impact should be described and quantified with relevant metrics (i.e. approximate number of people to be served by the social impact component.) Examples of social impact may include (but are not limited to):

- [1] Providing affordable housing within the proposed development.
- [2] Creating or retaining permanent (non-construction) jobs for local, diverse, lower-income individuals, including contribution or participation in job readiness and training programs.
- [3] Providing access to quality Pre-K and afterschool care programs.
- [4] Providing affordable healthy food access, if such access is not currently present in a community.
- [5] Providing opportunities for minority businesses, including flexible lease rates, contracting and supplier opportunities post-construction, and mentorship programs.
- [6] Investment in the local educational unit: public elementary, middle, high school, or community college.
- [7] Investment in proximate community facilities: parks, recreational center, library, health center (13-14).

While the general guidelines suggest that the "physical project can have a positive effect on people and communities," the identification of appropriate responses prioritizes economic concerns. "Providing access to Pre-K and afterschool care programs" and "healthy food access" (examples 3 and 4) have spatial criteria for which a physical project can demonstrate its benefit, other suggestions preface the economic imperatives. For example, both the inclusion of "creating permanent jobs" and "providing opportunities for minority businesses" (examples 2 and 5) are economic directives that consider their social benefit as a consequence. Similarly, the suggestions of investment in local educational and recreational facilities (examples 6 and 7) don't require any specific imperatives or modifications to their own physical project.

However, the suggestions make clear a set of categories for which the social metric could be responsible. Education, health, and recreation are all considered within the purview of a social good. In addition to this, the PRA includes housing in its list of potential responses. However, the inclusion of "affordable" as a qualifier for housing makes clear what kinds of housing the social metric is meant to further.

The intention to make Social Impact a subset of a larger, or simply a more quantifiable, discipline, is characteristic of its development as an assessment metric. Whether understood as part of Economic Impact or Environmental Impact, Social Impact has emerged as an interdisciplinary field frequently relegated to a category within a larger analysis.

### **1.3. Social Impact as Defined by the International Association for Impact Assessment**

Although a thorough literature review is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that Social Impact Assessment has been an established process since the 1970s. Sociologist Rabel Burdge describes its emergence in the United States as a larger movement to systematically analyze the environmental impacts of proposed developments.

In the USA, EIAs [Environmental Impact Analysis] done in the '70s included a socioeconomic component that was intended to be "social impacts" as required under the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) legislation. These early EIAs were done by engineers and landscape architects, who gave little attention to, or did not understand what was meant by, "social effects." "Socioeconomic" impacts became a baseline listing of demographic information for a project area.... However, most of the "socioeconomic" data were descriptive of the past—little was done to "project or assess" likely future change to human communities based on the proposed action or its alternatives (Burdge 2003, 85).

In Burdge's view, the social impact of a proposed project was obfuscated by its tethering to economic concerns. Demographic descriptions of existing conditions were substituted for the speculative impact of a project. Yet, as Ana Maria Esteves, Daniel Franks, and Frank Vanclay argue in their paper "Social Impact Assessment: The State of the Art," the role and significance of Social Impact Assessment both developed and gained traction within these economic confines. As a tool to counteract the economic impacts of international

developments it became not just a mitigating device to ameliorate social ills, but a pro-active measure to embed social mores within the project's financing:

International codes and standards, particularly when written into conditions of project financing, have provided an additional driver. The International Finance Corporation's Performance Standards, which have been adopted by some private lenders as the Equator Principles, are an example. The 2006 IFC Performance Standards (a revision of its safeguard policies in place since 1998) require the preparation of environmental and social action plans for all projects (36).

As such, the ability to incorporate social impact metrics not only with planning, but in the conceptualization of the project, makes social impact analysis an ongoing mechanism. This premise is developed clearly within the International Association for Impact Assessment's "Social Impact Assessment: Guidance for assessing and managing the social impacts of projects." They propose that the assessment process begins well before feasibility (starting with the exploration and identification of the project) and continuing not just through construction, but operations, and ultimately the closure of the project.

While not part of the single RFP, Philadelphia has followed many of the larger agendas set forth in the guidance documents by employing community participation in its urban planning initiatives, most notably in Philadelphia 2035, in which neighborhoods aided in the development of individual district plans. Within a number of these districts, including the Central District in which this case study is located, the plan calls for a strategy for maintaining and creating affordable housing.

In Philadelphia, the tension between the economic and social agendas of the city is reified in the form of housing. The inclusion of housing as a specific category of social impact within the RFP reflects the tension about urban growth and community stabilization.

## **2.0 NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION INITIATIVES**

### **2.1. The Actual Value Index**

In 2014, the city adopted the Actual Values Initiative (AVI) to reassess the values of privately owned properties for tax purposes. The intention of the citywide assessment was to take a comprehensive and equitable valuation in response to substantial variations between the city's assessment and the commercial assessment of a property. Addressing this disparity has been a contentious issue as neighborhoods that have seen an influx of wealthier residents worried their property taxes would increase dramatically. However, in the report by the Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative, *The Actual Value Initiative: Overhauling Property Taxes in Philadelphia*, the group found that there was no effective timetable for assessing property values. The last comprehensive survey had begun in 1983 and was completed in 1989 (12) under the auspices of the Board of Revision of Taxes. As neither the city nor the state had a mandated timetable for appraisals, piecemeal valuations became the norm, resulting in wildly different taxes for relatively similar properties.

The report suggests that the absence of a schedule was compounded by the city's adoption of a fractional assessment system. In this property assessment strategy, rather than estimating the full value of a property and applying a percentage to be tax specific to use type (commercial, residential, etc.), the property is initially evaluated at a predetermined ratio. The shift to the AVI at a time when isolated neighborhoods in the city were growing rapidly fostered suspicion among many long-time residents.

### **2.2. Longtime Owner Occupant Program**

Knowing that longtime residents from neighborhoods that have seen significant recent growth would be disproportionately impacted, the city instituted the Longtime Owner Occupant Program (LOOP). This program continues the work of other city based programs to foster owner occupancy, including the Homestead Exemption (for any Owner-Occupant) and state programs that protect seniors on fixed incomes and other vulnerable populations.

The program began in 2013 (the year the AVI process began) and required that the owner had lived in their home for 10 years. The program still accepts applicants as long as they have owned and lived in their homes since 2003. This protection was enacted specifically to stabilize neighborhoods in the wake of growth, while at the same time allowing the city to reap the benefits of that growth.

The four criteria for this exemption make this clear. The owner must live in the home (and cannot have more than three residential and one commercial units). The owner's property assessment must have tripled from

one year to the next (this is not unusual given the AVI and disparate growth). Finally, there is a cap relative to income and household size. These three parameters clearly identify the intention of the program to maintain the social fabric of residential neighbourhoods that could be clearly disadvantaged by economic development.

In addition to attempting to stabilize neighborhoods through tax initiatives, the city has also attempted to address affordable housing and its future development through zoning.

### **3.0 SPECTULATIVE AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

#### **3.1. The Case of 1 Water Street**

In 2015 the Zoning Code established the Mixed Income Housing Bonus which, applied to residential construction, increased allowable floor area and building height in exchange for a percentage of housing units being qualified as affordable or a contribution to the Housing Trust fund. The initiative was applied for the first time to 1 Water Street, a luxury apartment development by PMC Property Group. The inclusion of 25 subsidized apartments garnered an additional 4 floors and 30 units. This project was part of the Central Delaware Overlay, a specific geographic adjustment lobbied for by the Central Delaware Advocacy Group.

In June 2016, PMC asked that they be waived from the agreement to provide affordable housing units. Construction, including the additional stories, had already been completed. For one month, the city argued with the developer and withheld the Certificate of Occupancy, then agreed to a \$3.75 million contribution to the Philadelphia's Housing Trust Fund. Matt Ruben, Chair of the Central Delaware Advocacy Group, argued that the city had "won a tremendously important victory for affordable housing." To be clear, Matt Ruben is the chair of the advocacy group that helped to write the overlay which advocated the public's right to the waterfront, and after a developer agreed to and then simply rejected the premises of the overlay, he argued that this was a victory. (Ruben 2016)

The premise of Ruben's argument is that the \$3.75 million will do more to construct and sustain affordable housing in Philadelphia than 25 apartments. He contends this is made more evident when the law mandates that these remain "affordable" for only 15 years. In economic terms, he may be correct. However, in geographic terms, his argument is less clear.

The housing bonus itself is part of the Zoning Code and enforced uniformly across the city. The Central Delaware Advocacy group has been lobbying the city and negotiating with developers since its inception.

State and federal funding to support public infrastructure projects, such as capping a two-block area of I-95 to give public access to the water, are concerted strategies to promote development and provide public access to the Delaware River, a significant public amenity.

It is significant to note that the site of 1 Water Street, at the foot of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, is one block from the Field Operations-designed Race Street Pier, completed less than three years before. Additionally it will be one block north of a newly capped I-95 park. For each of these recreational and infrastructure projects, the city has contributed \$90 million, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation has contributed \$100 million, and the William Penn Foundation has contributed \$25 million. This does not account for the planning initiatives funded by the same governmental bodies, nor the countless volunteer hours from advocacy groups, neighborhood councils, and research groups.

The specific indignity of the result is that \$190 million of public money, on top of the specific density bonus applied to the building, resulted in no change to the design of 1 Water Street for the public good. One could argue that since the zoning commission had set the acceptable height and density (presumably for the benefit of the public), the city ultimately lost by some social metric.

According to local Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Inga Saffron, who asked PMC officials to comment on the reason for renegeing on the original deal, "Officials at PMC could not be reached for comment. Since their substitution proposal became public, they have declined to discuss the reasons for their change of heart."

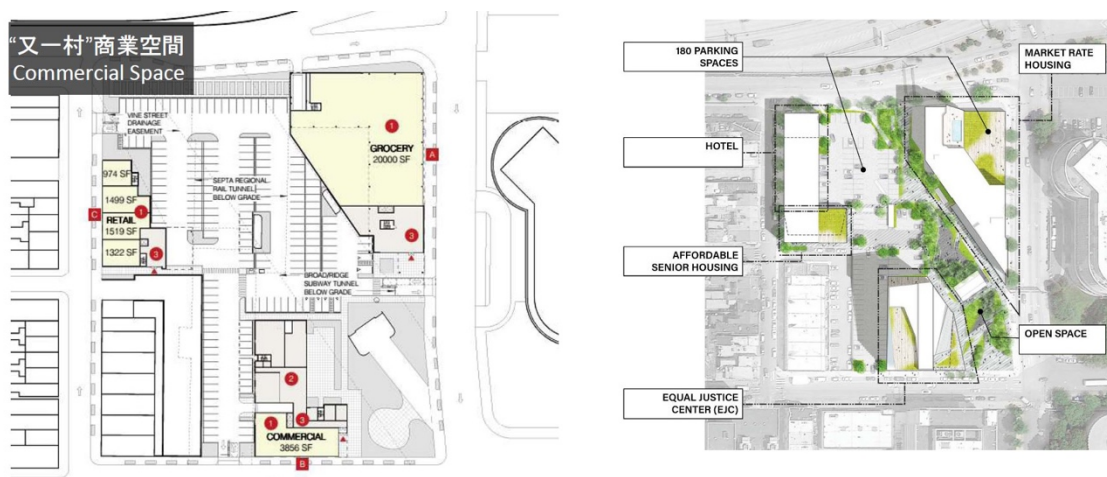
Similar to the 1 Water Street Project, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority's RFP for 800 Vine Street serves as a test balloon for a project aimed to leverage economically attractive opportunities to enact social good. However, unlike the density bonus whose trade-offs were explicitly codified, the social impact metric provides less prescriptive mandates.

## 4.0 INITIAL RESPONSES TO SOCIAL METRIC

### 4.1. Comparing Parkway and Pennrose

The Pennrose and Parkway responses to the specifics of the RFP are both fundamentally similar and radically different. In addition to the programmatic conditions outlined in the RFP, the SEPTA Regional Rail Tunnel and Broad/Ridge Subway Tunnel cut through the site and there is a set of existing buildings on the southwest corner, producing a limited footprint for potential buildings. Both projects responded by breaking the site into three component buildings addressing the three remaining corners and proposing a mix of parking and green space between them. Both projects include a substantial amount of market rate housing. The Parkway proposal contains 120 condominiums while the Pennrose proposal offers 160 rental units. Both provide approximately 180 parking spaces.

As both projects include considerable housing components, both take advantage of the social impact metric's inclusion of affordable housing and each provides approximately 60 affordable senior units.



**Figure 1:** Parkway Plan by Cecil Baker (Left). Pennrose Plan by WRT(Right)

The significant differences emerge in their attempt to qualify the social impact of their proposals.

The Parkway Proposal aligns itself with the local community, Chinatown. As a dense neighborhood located adjacent to Center City, the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC) has asked the city to acknowledge their need for more open and recreational spaces. The inclusion of an “Intergenerational Playground” and a 5,000 sq. ft. urban farm are clear attempts to respond to this mandate. The addition of a grocery store is a direct response to the social impact’s criteria to provide “affordable healthy food access.” This strategy also dovetails with another RFP metric, specific to the project. The RFP provides 20% of its score to this category, and one of its three criteria is “Alignment with Local Community/Context: Strength of the proposal’s response to the community and its existing conditions, consideration toward the current residential/commercial market, and potential to be a catalyst for other development.” The geographic and social adjacencies to the site are clearly leveraged here to demonstrate the project’s potential social impact.

Rather than partnering with a local community, the Pennrose team organized their proposal around a headquarters for the Equal Justice Center (EJC). The EJC was conceived by the Philadelphia Bar Foundation to coordinate the legal aid agencies in the city of Philadelphia. The proposed center would provide a hub to legal aid organizations currently spread across the city and allow a single client to access a number of different agencies in one location. As the site is situated amongst a set of significant civic buildings, including the Philadelphia Police Headquarters, the headquarters would establish the group as a significant actor and give it public presence. The proposal estimates that, “[t]he EJC will serve over 40,000 individuals and low income families annually from the Chinatown community and the City of Philadelphia in one central location easily

accessible via public transit” (Pennrose 2017, 19). It also contends that the design will “provide much needed open space, over 30,000 GSF [Gross Square Feet] of beautifully landscaped area extending pedestrian connections from Chinatown, Franklin Square Park, and Independence Mall” (19). While the EJC headquarters occupies the southeastern corner and the market rate housing occupies the northeast, the affordable housing is sandwiched in between the existing building and the proposed Comfort Inn Hotel on the northwestern corner.



**Figure 1:** Parkway rendering by Cecil Baker (Left). Pennrose rendering by WRT (Right)

The design and imagery associated with the two proposals are equally at odds. The Parkway scheme, designed by Cecil Baker, limits its height to six stories, and adopts a relatively humble palette of colors appropriate to a residential project. The relatively simple forms hold the prominent corners and surround the park. The Pennrose design was produced by Wallace Roberts and Todd (WRT) and features 8-14-story glass prisms surrounded by an immaculate landscape appropriate to a corporate lobby.

The selection of the Pennrose project can be attributed to a number of criteria. Gregory Heller, the Executive director of the PRA, acknowledged “The architecture was ambitious and really set the tone for how Philadelphia wants to develop” (Adelman 2017). The developer, on the other hand, attributed the potential success of the proposal to the EJC, referring to it as “our differentiator.” (Blumgart 2017) Thoai Nguyen, head of the Southeast Asian advocacy group SEAMACC confirmed the significance of the EJC:

“The tie breaker for me is the Equal Justice Center,” said Nguyen. “In the next four years, and perhaps the next eight, our communities are going to be under attack. The Equal Justice Center to me is a no-brainer [for that reason]. But my very naive question is this: Is it possible that whichever proposal is selected would consider a version of the Equal Justice Center?” (Blumgart 2017)

We might question to what degree the social impact metric actually affected the design, as it seems there is little sacrificed in the name of profit. The building benefits from the zoning density bonus previously described by including affordable housing. The resulting buildings are comprised of a hotel, an office building (occupied by a socially significant client), and an apartment building. Yet, it should be clear that both proposals took seriously the charge that their project should significantly benefit the social fabric of the community and city.

#### **4.2. The Continued Impact of the Social Metric**

Since the RFP for 800 Vine Street introduced the social impact metric to the process in the fall of 2016, it has been included only one subsequent RFP to date. That project is much smaller and in a less profitable neighborhood. The RFP provides a clearly defined social scope to demolish an old library and build a new library and affordable housing.

If the Social Impact metric is intended to have continued significance, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority should establish appropriate criteria for selecting city owned parcels for the process. The relatively small portion of the city’s land that falls under the PRA’s purview suggests that those parcels that have significant economic value should be leveraged to enact social good.

This should address not only the contemporary value of individual parcels, but the history of the social fabric and public investment of the larger neighborhood. The case of the PMC Group’s attempt to evade the affordable housing agreement makes this clear. Both the past (neighborhoods that have seen their schools

and libraries shuttered) and future (districts that have been earmarked for significant public funds) should be accounted for within the Social Impact metric.

## CONCLUSION

The City of Philadelphia has attempted to produce equitable metrics for growth, housing, taxes, and other equally complex and contentious topics. The zoning initiative was understood as a 25-year process to account for the changing uses of the city, protect current neighborhoods and citizens, and prepare for future transformations. Land assessments and tax evaluations leveraged the city's recent growth to fund the city's schools, fire departments, and subways, while not discounting those who had lived through the city's decline. While some initiatives provide economic incentive to develop spaces for the public good, like affordable housing, others need to acknowledge the geographic significance of place.

The Social Impact metric could provide a useful device to steer the development of city-owned property and further the public good. While the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority is only one of the agencies that manages these assets, it is historically one of the most influential. Given the audacity of PMC's test of the city's commitment to the social impact of its projects at 1 Water Street, the city needs to not only affirm its commitment, but develop analytical tools to augment it.

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