



The Inspiration Behind Durham's Sustainable Decision-Making Tool

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Section 1: Introduction

Humanity has so profoundly impacted the global environment that experts have dubbed this era “the Anthropocene”. According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, there are nine planetary boundaries “within which humanity can continue to develop and thrive for generations to come.”¹ These boundaries are Climate Change, Biosphere Integrity, Land-system Change, Freshwater Change, Biogeochemical Flows, Ocean Acidification, Atmosphere Aerosol Loading, Stratospheric Ozone Depletion, and Novel Entities. As we bypass each boundary, the risk of creating irreversible large-scale environmental changes increases. To help remediate and adapt to this crisis, many cities in the United States have begun to develop sustainable policies and goals.

The City of Durham and Durham County of North Carolina have developed their own set of sustainable plans and policies for the next several decades. Namely, they have created the Durham County Carbon Neutrality Renewable Energy Plan², the Durham City-County GHG Inventory and Action Plan³, the Durham City Carbon Neutral and Renewable Energy Action Plan⁴, and the 2023 Comprehensive Land Use Plan⁵. The *Sustainable Decision-Making Framework* is intended to support Durham elected officials in evaluating the environmental implications of a proposed action, policy, or project. The questions in the tool are aligned with the objectives of existing plans, like the 2023 Comprehensive Plan. It will consequently help decision-makers understand the full ramifications of the proposal they evaluate.

The purpose of this document is to justify the substance and organization of Durham’s *Sustainable Decision-Making Framework*. It should therefore be used in conjunction with the framework. The four questions included in the *Sustainable Decision-Making Framework* were inspired by similar frameworks used in leading sustainable cities in the United States. These cities are listed in the table below. These cities were also chosen as they reflect a range of relevant characteristics: population size and the employment type of the City Councilmembers. Their respective frameworks are also varied in structure and use. This variation ensures that the structure and composition of the *Sustainable Decision-Making Framework* reflects the best components of existing frameworks. The population sizes and position requirements of the Councilmembers of each city assessed is outlined in the table below.

City	Population Size	Full or Part Time City Councilmembers
Durham County	337k	Part-time
Lake Oswego, Oregon	40k	Unknown
Kirkland, Washington	92k	Part-time ⁶
Charleston, South Carolina	153k	Part-time ⁷
Providence, Rhode Island	190k	Part-time ⁸
Sacramento, California	530k	Part-time ⁹
Portland, Oregon	635k	Full-time ¹⁰
Boston, Massachusetts	654k	Full-time ¹¹
Nashville, Tennessee	683k	Part-time ¹²
Austin, Texas	964k	Full-time ¹³
King County, Washington	2.3 million	Part-time (city) ¹⁴
Chicago, Illinois	2.7 million	Part-time ¹⁵

*All population sizes were sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau

Section 2: Overview of Similar Frameworks

Section Summary

The structure of the *Sustainable Decision-Making Framework* is not common, or at least not commonly available to the public, in the United States. Cities in the U.S. often choose to create similar tools solely for land use management decisions. Only a few cities have structured their sustainable decision-making tools to address both development projects and policy. These cities include Austin, Texas and Kirkland, Washington. It is essential that Durham’s framework is also meant to be used for a variety of proposals—not just land use management decisions—as almost all decisions City Council makes *will* impact the environment directly or indirectly.

This section discusses the peer frameworks mentioned in the graphic above by categorizing each tool by their structure and use. The resulting categories are as follows: Sustainable or Equity Checklist, Land Use Criteria, and Sustainable Plan Addendums.

Sustainable or Equity Checklist

The tools addressed in this section are associated with Kirkland, Washington, Austin, Texas, Sacramento, California, and Lake Oswego, Oregon. The link to these sources can be found either in the citations section at the end of this document.

A. Kirkland, Washington

I. Introduction to Kirkland, Washington’s Tool

The city of Kirkland developed a *Sustainable Decision Making Matrix*¹⁶ to assess whether a proposal is in line with the goals of their *Sustainability Master Plan*¹⁷. The tool is structured as a series of multiple-choice questions. Each question and response are assigned a corresponding score based on Kirkland’s evaluation of the importance of that criteria. An example is included below.

Criteria 1: Greenhouse Gas Reduction

with the goals of the Sustainability Master Plan.

How much will taking this action reduce green house gas emissions in Kirkland?

- 0 Not applicable
- 1 Will not reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- 2 Will marginally reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- 3 Will moderately reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- 4 Will significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- 5 Will extremely reduce greenhouse gas emissions

Greenhouse Gas Weighted Score

Multiply the rating by 5:

_____ x 5 =

How could this action be adjusted to further reduce emissions?

II. Analysis of the Tool and Relevance to Durham

The substance of this question corresponds to the key focus areas outlined in Durham’s Comprehensive Plan. As such, the content was used to guide Durham’s tool. Specifically, Criteria 1 above inspired Question 1 in Durham’s framework.

That said, the fact that each question is multiple choice is less than ideal. While this aids in streamlining each response and establishing a replicable baseline for each proposal, the selection of one of the 0-5 scores is highly subjective. Each applicant might have a different interpretation or understanding of what “moderately” or “extremely” means. As such, this tool might end up exchanging ease for accuracy.

Secondly, while each criterion is followed up with a question that inquires how the action could be adjusted to improve the sustainability or equity of the proposal, it otherwise does not provide a section where the applicant can explain their response.

B. Austin, Texas

I. Overall Description

The city of Austin developed a *Framework for Decision Making* that is intended to guide the decisions of lawmakers in Austin on all actions or policies they consider or develop.¹⁸ The framework is structured as a series of criteria categorized by their overarching theme. The categories included in this framework are Natural and Sustainable, Prosperous, Livable, Mobile and Interconnected, Educated, Creative, and A Community That Values and Respects People. The most relevant categories to this tool are Natural and Sustainable and A Community That Values and Respects People. Examples of criteria from these two sections is written below in the graphic.

Natural and Sustainable

- The proposal adds to or enhances the City of Austin’s green infrastructure system.
- The proposal reduces water or energy demands, uses or generates alternative energy, or provides alternative transportation options.

A Community That Values and Respects People

- The proposal increases access to park, library, public safety, or health and human services.
- The proposal provides an opportunity to engage grassroots stakeholders and community members.

II. Analysis of the Tool and Relevance to Durham

The structure and content of this checklist is highly applicable to Durham’s own purposes. The structure is easy to follow, and it is specific enough to limit misinterpretation. These criteria are pretty typical to the genre, and thus did not specifically inspire any particular aspects of Durham’s framework. However, they do serve to underline the typical concerns

addressed in all cities (e.g. water and energy demands), and thus indicate which concerns should be addressed in Durham’s framework.

C. Sacramento, California

I. Overall Description

Unlike the previous two cities, the City of Sacramento developed the *Racial Equity & Sustainability Toolkit* to specifically address equity and environmental justice concerns within the city.¹⁹ This tool is intended to guide the development, not the evaluation, of policies and projects. As such, it includes questions regarding the implementation of whatever action is being considered. Examples of the questions are included below.

- 1) Does your department have a definition of racial equity or defined goals/outcomes around racial equity?
- 2) What opportunity area(s) will the project primarily impact?
 - a. Environment
 - b. Health
 - c. Housing
 - d. Jobs/Workforce
 - e. Parks/Open Space
 - f. Parking
 - g. Public Right of Way
 - h. Community Development
 - i. Criminal Justice

Continued ...

II. Analysis of the Tool and Relevance to Durham

In contrast to the other tools, this framework was more focused on the implementation of EJ policy in each project. As such, this framework inspired but did not directly influence any questions in the Sustainable Decision-Making Framework.

D. Lake Oswego, California

I. Overall Description

The *Sustainability Decision Tool Handout* was created to ensure City Staff make decisions based on the values outlined in their *Comprehensive Plan*.²⁰ The tool is a series of four sections that touch on different aspects of the Comprehensive Plan: overall community vision, sustainability, and economic development. An example of one of the four sections is included below.

Is the proposal consistent with the Sustainability Principles?

Sustainability Principle 1: What we take does not build up in and harm nature or people

Reduce and ultimately eliminate our community's dependence on fossil fuels and wasteful use of scarce metals and minerals. Use renewable resources whenever possible.

- *Does it reduce or eliminate use of fossil fuels in buildings or from transportation?*
- *Does it increase efficiency (energy, water, materials), reliability, or connectivity in essential public infrastructure?*

Sustainability Principle 2: What we make does not build up in and harm nature or people

Reduce and ultimately eliminate our community's dependence upon persistent chemicals and wasteful use of synthetic substances. Use biologically safe products whenever possible.

- *Does it encourage use of chemical-free and toxic-free building materials?*
- *Does it reduce risks to human and environmental health from exposure to toxins?*

Sustainability Principle 3: We protect natural systems from degradation

Reduce and ultimately eliminate our community's contribution to new encroachment upon nature (e.g. land, water, wildlife, forests, soil, ecosystems). Protect natural, life-sustaining ecosystems.

- *Does it incorporate designs that respect natural systems such as watersheds and wildlife corridors?*
- *Does it reflect carrying capacity of natural systems and the community's ability to provide services?*

Sustainability Principle 4: We support people to meet their own needs

Reduce and ultimately eliminate conditions that systematically undermine people's capacity to meet their own needs.

- *Does it provide a range of housing choices to meet the diverse needs of the community?*
- *Does it involve citizens in decision-making in a meaningful way?*

II. Analysis of the Tool and Relevance to Durham

The structure of this tool is ideal, and directly inspired Durham's *Sustainable Decision-Making Framework*. While there are more questions on their document than is most likely viable for Durham's purposes, the categorization into different environmental aspects is extremely useful. This inspired the idea to have a different focus area for each question on Durham's plan.

E. Portland, Oregon

I. Overall Description

Portland uses the *Technical Guidance For Assessing Environmental Justice in Regulatory Actions* created by the EPA.²¹ This tool is intended to help outline potential environmental justice concerns for regulatory actions. This document is extensive in outlining environmental justice goals, definitions, and differential impacts. The most applicable aspect of this framework is the "Analyzing Differential Impacts" section. There are three questions included in this section that essentially summarize the potential EJ implications of regulations. These questions are included below.

- 1) Are there potential EJ concerns associated with environmental stressors affected by the regulatory action for population groups of concern for the regulatory option(s) under consideration?
- 2) Are there potential EJ concerns associated with environmental stressors affected by the regulatory action for population groups of concern in the baseline?
- 3) For the regulatory option(s) under consideration, are potential EJ concerns created or mitigated compared to the baseline?

II. Analysis of the Tool and Relevance to Durham

The questions above address whether the regulatory action will mitigate, exacerbate, or create environmental justice issues. This framework demonstrates the necessity of asking whether EJ concerns are impacted or created in any way by the action, rather than simply asking if EJ issues are relevant or connected to the action being assessed. This aspect was consequently included in Question 2 of Durham's framework.

However, these questions are worded in a complex manner, and therefore might result in less than accurate answers from applicants who might be unaccustomed to the wording. As such, for Durham's purposes, it would be prudent to simplify and condense the language to make it more accessible.

Land Use Criteria

These tools discussed in this section were intended to only be used to evaluate city planning or development projects. This is a narrower focus than ideal for Durham's purposes. Regardless, these tools provide valuable insight into the different sustainable considerations that other cities consider important in planning for infrastructure or housing development.

The cities assessed in this section are Chicago, Illinois and Boston, Massachusetts.

A. Chicago, Illinois

I. Overall Description

The City of Chicago developed a *Sustainable Development Plan* to ensure that city-assisted development projects included sustainable design elements²². The criteria in this plan are designed to help improve energy efficiency and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, among other goals.

This tool is structured as a table of criteria that are associated with points. Different types of projects are required to attain a specific number of points before the project can continue. For example, Planned Development Projects must earn 100 points. A section of this table is included below as a reference.

Compliance Options	Points Required									
	Starting Points	Number of Optional Points Required New Construction / Substantial Rehab / Moderate Rehab	Health	Energy						
1.1 Achieve WELL Building Standard			2.1 Designed to earn the Energy Star	2.2 Exceed Energy Code (5%)	2.3 Exceed Energy Code (10%)	2.4 Exceed Energy Code (25%)	2.5 Exceed Energy Code (40%)	2.6 Onsite Renewable Energy (3%)	2.7 Onsite Renewable Energy (5%)	
Compliance Paths										
Options Without Certification										
All Options Available	0	100 / 50 / 25	40	30	20	30	40	50	10	20
Options With Certification										
LEED Platinum	95	5 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
LEED Gold	90	10 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	NA	50	10	20
LEED Silver	80	20 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	40	50	10	20
Green Globes 4-Globes	90	10 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	NA	50	10	20
Green Globes 3-Globes	80	20 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	40	50	10	20
Green Globes 2-Globes	70	30 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	40	50	10	20
Living Building Challenge	100	0 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Living Building Challenge Petal	90	10 / 0 / 0	40	NA	20	30	40	50	NA	NA
Enterprise Green Communities*	80	20 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	10	20
PassiveHouse	70	30 / 0 / 0	40	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	10	20

II. Analysis of the Tool and Relevance to Durham

As this tool is intended for construction projects--not policy--the criteria listed in this tool are very specific. It is valuable to consider these criteria in order to ensure that all relevant land use or development ramifications are considered. However, the tool is more specific and longer than is advisable for Durham's purposes. The criteria in this tool did not directly influence any of the questions in Durham's framework.

B. Boston, Massachusetts

I. Overall Description

The City of Boston developed a *Climate Resiliency Checklist* which is required to be filled out before proposals are seen by the Boston Planning & Development Agency.²³ The intention of this framework is to inform City Staff as to the sustainability measures and environmental impacts of each proposal. The graphic below outlines example questions.

1. Describe how the building and its systems will evolve to further reduce GHG emissions and achieve net zero and net positive performance (e.g. added efficiency measures, renewable energy, energy storage, etc.) and the timeline for meeting that goal (by 2050).
2. Describe all building and site measures to reduce heat-island effects at the site and in the surrounding area.
3. Describe all building and site measures for reducing stormwater run-off.
4. Describe how site and building systems will be adopted to efficiently accommodate future more significant rain events.

II. Analysis of the Tool and Relevance to Durham

Like Chicago's framework, the structure of this tool is not ideal for Durham's purposes. There are too many questions, and they only assess infrastructure. However, again similar to Chicago's framework, there are specific environmental impact references which are aligned with Durham's Comprehensive Plan: namely, the reference to heat-island effects in question two above. The conjoint reference to heat island effects in Durham's Comprehensive Plan and this tool led to the inclusion of this impact in Question 3 of the framework.

Sustainable Plan Addendums

The following section discusses the remainder of the documents that were analyzed to construct Durham's sustainable framework. These tools were addendums to the City's or County's overall sustainability plan.

The cities discussed in this section are King County, Washington, Providence, Rhode Island, Charleston, South Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee.

A. King County, Washington

I. Overall Description

King County created a *Climate Action Toolkit* to help their communities reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase community resilience, and generally attain sustainable goals.²⁴ The Toolkit is structured as an instruction manual on how to create these programs or policies, rather than to assess previously created actions.

Within this document is a section entitled "Equity and Environmental Justice Considerations". This section contains a series of questions King County Staff advise should be answered in developing a climate action strategy. These questions are relevant to Durham's sustainable goals and are included in the graphic below.

- 1) Who is involved in the decision-making process and who has historically been left out?
- 2) How might marginalized communities benefit from local government action on climate in their area (e.g. greater access to safe and efficient public transport or reduced heat island effect from expanded canopy cover)?
- 3) Who benefits from this action and who is disproportionately impacted?
- 4) What jobs may be created/lost from this action?
- 5) Which actions are no or low-cost?

These questions are decidedly focused on environmental justice concerns. Unlike Portland, Oregon’s EJ questions, these are easy to understand and answer. The third question written above is the most applicable in *assessing* the viability of previously created actions. The wording of this question is ideal, as it directly asks the applicant to consider the heart of EJ matters; does this action have disparate effects? As such, this question was directly modeled in Question 2 of Durham’s sustainable framework.

B. Providence, Rhode Island

I. Overall Description

In Providence, Rhode Island’s *Sustainable Providence Plan*²⁵, there is a tool entitled *the Sustainability Evaluation Tool*.²⁶ This tool is intended to help city departments evaluate whether development projects are aligned with the goals outlined in the *Sustainable Providence Plan*.

This tool outlines questions that will help the user consider the action’s alignment with each major objective of the plan. There are fourteen questions associated with the “Environmental Protection & Public Health” objective. As always, the graphic below displays a few of them.

- 1) Will this project avoid impacts to land at and adjacent to the development site that are physically unsuitable for development, such as slopes greater than 25%, wetlands, and aquifer recharge areas?
- 2) Will the project meet any established sustainable design criteria (e.g. LEED criteria)?
- 3) If a project has a residential component, will the homes be located within ½ mile of parks playing areas, trails, or other green space areas that are publicly accessible and can facilitate active recreation (e.g. walking, cycling, organized games)?

II. Analysis of Tool and Relevance to Durham

These questions are ideal in that they limit misunderstandings or vague interpretations of the project by referencing specific metrics. To replicate this specificity, Durham’s framework references policies and goals within the Comprehensive Plan.

The first question above directly inspired Question 3 in Durham’s framework (specifically, the “land adjacent” section of the question). This consideration is hugely important in that ecological issues rarely abide by small human-defined borders, and therefore need to be considered when determining the impact to ecosystems.

C. Charleston, South Carolina

I. Overall Description

Charleston’s Climate Action Task Force developed and used specific criteria in creating action items and goals for Charleston’s *Climate Action Plan*.²⁷ As these criteria were used to create action items, many are focused on assessing the feasibility of implementing the action. That said, they did use several questions to assess the equity and environmental ramifications of each action.²⁸ These questions are included below.

- 1) What is the GHG emissions reduction potential?
- 2) Can it reduce inequity?
- 3) Does it benefit vulnerable communities?





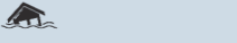
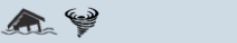
II. Analysis of Tool and Relevance to Durham

While simplicity can often be a virtue for a widely used tool, these questions are too restrained to result in comprehensive answers. The small exception to this critique is the first question outlined above. The greenhouse gas emission potential of an action is a relatively straightforward assessment, and therefore requires an uncomplicated answer. As such, the first question included above directly influenced Question 1 in Durham’s framework.

D. Nashville, Tennessee

I. Overall Description

The creators of the *Metro Nashville Climate Adaptation and Resilience Pla*²⁹ appended a “Potential Impact” figure to the plan. The city staff used this figure to assess the impact of various actions in the city.³⁰ A sample of the figure is below.

Applicable Hazards	 Potential Impacts: Natural Environment	Ecosystem Services	Flora/ Forests/ Trees	Watersheds/ Hydrology	Fauna/ Native Species	Cascading Vulnerability Outcome(s)?
		D	E	F	G	
	Damage or destruction of plants and trees, including tree canopy and associated benefits, and crops.	X	X	X	X	YES
	Injury or death of animals, reptiles, birds, and/or insects.	X			X	YES
	Erosion and surface run-off, increasing pollution and reducing water quality in streams, lakes and reservoirs.	X	X	X	X	YES
	Loss of slope integrity, leading to landslides and erosion.	X		X		YES
	Changes to landscapes, leading to cascading ecosystem changes such as in spawning habitats, changes in the timing of life cycles, and disruptions to migratory routes.	X	X	X	X	NO

II. Analysis of Tool and Relevance to Durham

The biggest asset of this tool is its focus on specific environmental impacts: erosion, surface run-off, and lethal or sub-lethal impacts on animals. The other frameworks tend to be more general in their exploration into the action’s impacts. A prime example of this is Providence, Rhode Island’s first question; will this project avoid impacts to land at and adjacent to the development sites that are physically unsuitable for development?

Presumably, the authors of the other frameworks chose not to mention particular impacts as the accidental exclusion of an impact could limit the accuracy of the assessment. This potential affect is compounded by the reality that it would be difficult to completely predict each potential impact each future action or policy might have.

However, as discussed previously, there is also a danger in using questions that are too general or simple. As such, Durham’s framework modeled Nashville’s tool by addressing specific impacts of concern highlighted by the Comprehensive Plan. This is reflected in Question 3.

Section 3: Final Question Justification

Question 1: Does this action decrease or increase greenhouse gas emissions now or in the future?

a. Why is the topic addressed?

Climate change is one of the most prominent and powerful consequences of our current industrial system. Any sustainable framework should consequently address this crisis.

More to the point, climate change is addressed in *all* of Durham’s sustainable plans (which are previously listed in the introduction of this document). The reduction of GHG emissions was also mentioned in many of the frameworks analyzed in this document.

b. Why is this the structure of the question?

The structure of this question was inspired by Kirkland’s and Charleston’s tools. Both cities made a point in asking how much the action will reduce GHG emissions. The word “increase” was added to this question to account for the possibility that the action being evaluated would contribute to GHG emissions.

Question 2: Who benefits from this action and who is disproportionately impacted? Will this action further entrench any existing unjust environmental issues or systems?

a. Why is the topic addressed?

Environmental racism affects many communities in North Carolina. Policies and land use decisions have negatively affected the health, well-being, and livelihood of many people in North Carolina for years. Sustainable solutions should only be considered as long-term options when they take into account how communities will be affected.

The importance of Environmental justice was accentuated by its numerous references in the Comprehensive Plan (Page 94) and throughout most of the frameworks analyzed above.

b. Why is this the structure of the question?

The first part of this question (Who benefits from this action and who is disproportionately impacted) was directly inspired by King County’s tool. The structure of this question speaks to the heart of environmental justice issues.

The second part of this question was added, as some actions may make it more difficult to dismantle environmental justice issues, even if they do not directly impact communities in and of themselves.

Question 3: How will this action influence:

- a) water quality
- b) air quality
- c) heat islands or their effects
- d) flooding
- e) habitat fragmentation
- f) biodiversity

A. Why are these impacts specifically addressed?

These environmental impacts are often not immediately considered, yet they all have multiplicative natures. In other words, they affect many critical environmental systems or various aspects of daily life. For example, when water quality is impacted, it can not only degrade critical environmental processes (like nutrient recycling or carbon sequestration), but also impact human health. These areas were also highlighted by name in the Comprehensive Plan (Policies 84, 86, 87, 96, 111).

Question 4: Will this action impact ecologically sensitive or valuable natural areas or land adjacent to those areas?

a. Why is the topic addressed?

Sensitive and valuable ecosystems are particularly vulnerable to human disturbance, and therefore need to be afforded extra protection. These areas can be impacted by both land use-decisions and policies that are not part of that designation. For example, plastic products can impair ecosystems. If Durham City Council imposed stricter controls or a tax on plastic products, they would help protect ecologically sensitive ecosystems.

b. Why is this the structure of the question?

The question is a combination of Policy 79 in the Comprehensive Plan and the word “adjacent” in Providence, RI’s tool. It is important to include proximal lands in this question, as spillover often occurs.

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