

CITY PROFILE ON RACIAL EQUITY

# Takoma Park, Maryland



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# Takoma Park City Profile on Racial Equity

Takoma Park, Maryland, a Washington, DC suburb of 17,600 people, recognizes that racial inequities have become institutionalized in the policy and practices of many agencies. To ensure their city works for all its residents, Mayor Kate Stewart and the city council committed to address racial equity proactively and deliberately as part of its decision-making process. This city is working toward dismantling institutionalized racism to ensure a vibrant, inclusive, equitable and healthy community for all city residents.

Beginning in 2016, the mayor and council began hearing from several sources in Maryland about efforts to advance racial equity in municipalities. After hearing a presentation from the National League of Cities and its Race, Equity And Leadership (REAL) director at the Maryland Municipal League conference, Mayor Stewart worked with a few other council members to explore ways the city could proactively adopt a racial equity framework to apply to the city's decision-making process. Following that, Mayor Stewart made a commitment to address the impacts of institutional racism that have created disparities in outcomes for people of color in the city.

## Creating a Racial Equity Impact Statement

Based on a growing understanding of how inequities have become embedded throughout government institutions, the city council began efforts to embed an intentional focus on racial equity into the day to day business and decision making of the council and city departments. "Diversity is about numbers but to make sure we are truly inclusive takes ongoing work, including recognizing the history of racism in our country and how racial inequities have become institutionalized in the policies and practices of many agencies,



**Downtown Takoma Park where residents gather for their farmer's market and other festivals.**

governmental and others," Mayor Stewart said.

Working closely with REAL, Mayor Stewart made racial equity a priority at the annual planning retreat for city council members and department heads in January 2017. REAL facilitated workshops on racial equity and encouraged participants to identify tools to help the council address the city's issues. This move helped the council think strategically about incorporating racial equity into the city's guiding priorities and to discuss the adoption of a racial equity framework.

The council committed to applying a racial equity lens to government decisions by creating

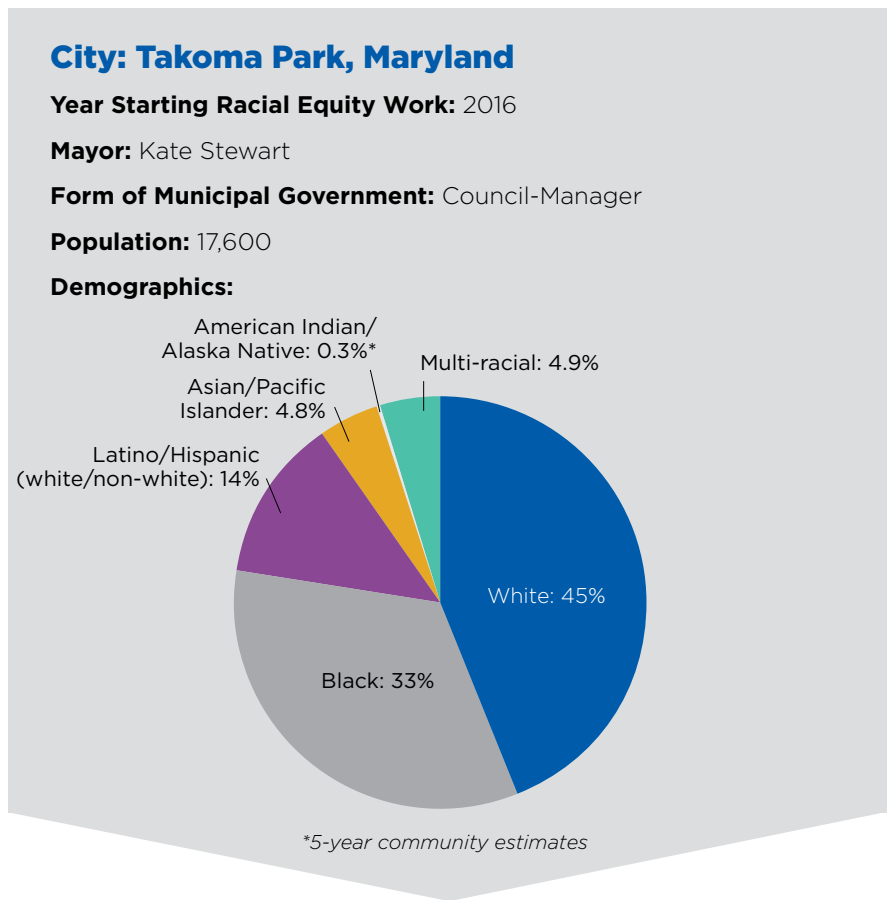
a permanent spot on their council meeting agenda for a "Racial Equity Impact Statement." This statement, like the council's Fiscal Impact Statement, will prompt councilmembers to discuss how an agenda item will have an adverse impact on Takoma Park residents. The statement serves to push the council to consider the disparate consequences of all policies, even those that are seemingly neutral, and determine whether they are contributing to racial inequities. The city council adopted the Racial Equity Impact Statement through a resolution in April of 2017. As a result of the racial equity impact statement, the council has had more opportunities to think



about the way in which routine city functions are performed. For instance, at a council meeting, an examination of the way city officials and staff work with the state highway administration to address road maintenance yielded a new plan to meet regularly and review information from a number of sources, rather than waiting for residents to complain. This strategy will address racial inequities as communities of color, for many reasons, are less likely to issue complaints.

One challenge the city has encountered in preparing its racial equity impact statement is access to sufficient data that is broken down by race and ethnicity. As a smaller city, the information available from the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey can be less useful. The city looks to address this as it gears up to conduct its first community-wide survey in almost five years. City leaders are looking at adding questions that capture some of the data on how residents experience city services, which will help them to be able to assess the equity impacts. The city was initially concerned that asking questions about residents’ race and ethnicity would be off-putting, due to an assumed “race-blind” orientation, but believe differently now of the value and need for accurate information that does not obscure disparate impacts by race.

To begin applying a racial equity lens to the city’s policy analysis, the council and city manager are examining disparities in use of city services and corresponding budget allocations. The council decided to restructure the recreation department and library programs based on its extensive use by residents of color. In the next fiscal year, these departments



will see an increase in staff positions and budget allocations, to improve the quality of services.

### Making Racial Equity a Priority Across the Entire City

The city has made it a priority to equip city staff with tools to examine the disparate racial impacts of their work. Five councilmembers, three police captains, two community development managers and all city department heads participated in a joint racial equity training. The training is a starting point which will help the city build a shared understanding and shared language, allowing them to better align their work.

“It is essential that issues of racial equity be addressed proactively and deliberately to ensure the

decision-making benefits our whole community. If policies and programs do not work for some groups in our city that means they do not work for our city overall,” said Mayor Stewart.

Takoma Park is demographically diverse with most of the population being people of color, but many city leaders have expressed concerns that civic engagement opportunities have often excluded residents of color. The city has prioritized engaging their constituents of color more intentionally and gaining buy-in from residents of all backgrounds. The mayor and community members have participated in Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) trainings facilitated by local residents to challenge them to acknowledge systems of power and privilege



and use their capability to push for change.

### **Sustaining Awareness and Community Buy-In for Racial Equity**

The city council and the mayor's blogs are one-way local leaders are raising awareness to residents about the history of inequity. Mayor Stewart and the city council are also taking advantage of their monthly coffee hours to reframe community issues through a racial equity lens. The usual dialogue with community members is supplemented with the opportunity to provide residents

with a thorough understanding of how structural racism has impacted Takoma Park.

Boards and commissions are important opportunities for community members to influence government decisions in Takoma Park. The council is looking to use these structures to build a larger base of residents of color who can serve as leaders. To support this, they are exploring opportunities to secure funding for community members from marginalized populations to participate in future trainings and adopt a racial equity framework for their work with communities.

## **Summary: Takoma Park**

**1 Tackling Racial Inequities in a Small City:** As a city of 17,600, Takoma Park is one of the few small cities to tackle racial inequities through leadership from the mayor and city council.

**2 Prioritizing Racial Equity on City Council:** Implementing the use of a racial equity impact statement for each item on the council agenda has helped the council prioritize racial equity in each of its meetings.

**3 Building a Racial Equity Data Resource:** A small city without extensive resources, Takoma Park has recognized the challenge of assessing disparate racial impact without sufficient data and is addressing this issue by disseminating its own community survey.