San Diego's climate equity report targets neighborhoods that need investment

By Andrea Lopez-Villafaña

The city of San Diego has developed a new tool that measures climate inequity in its neighborhoods with the goal of helping city departments prioritize projects, grants and efforts for improvement.

The “Climate Equity Index,” created by the city’s Sustainability Department and the University of San Diego Energy Policy Initiatives Center, uses environmental and socioeconomic factors to score more than 290 census tracts in the city.

“San Diego is setting a new standard for the rest of the country when it comes to addressing climate action and equity,” Mayor Kevin Faulconer said in a statement Wednesday. “The Climate Equity Index is the first of its kind in the nation, and will help us hone in on the communities that need our attention and investment the most.”

Thirty-five indicators are used to measure climate equity across the city’s 297 census tracts, producing scores on such issues as flood risk, tree coverage, asthma rates, housing cost burden, pedestrian access and unemployment. The report identifies areas with better access to public transit, for instance, as well as areas that have barriers to energy conservation technology.

With scores ranging from 1 to 100, at least 125 census tracts scored below average, having “very low, low, or moderate access to opportunity.” That includes 13 tracts with “very low access” in Barrio Logan, Lincoln Park, Nestor, Tijuana River Valley, Logan Heights, Palm City, Mountain View, Stockton, Grant Hill, Southcrest, Teralta East and Shelltown.

Barrio Logan scored a 0 overall, for instance, while Lincoln Park had a 3 score and Tijuana River Valley and Nestor each scored a 6.
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“The data show that there is a disproportionate amount of people of color in our below average tracts,” the report said.

Using the index, the city also released an interactive map that allows people to hover over their neighborhood and see how it scores on the range of indicators, such as “bikeability,” tree coverage, or unemployment.

Some neighborhoods would have a high score on desirable indicators such as tree coverage and lower scores on less desirable characteristics such as fire risk.

The city is moving away from using the term “disadvantaged” to describe its neighborhoods disproportionately affected by climate change, instead calling them “communities of concern,” a phrase they say is preferred by community members.

Yet the report quantifies the neighborhoods with the most challenges. For instance, some tracts in Barrio Logan and Lincoln showed an 85.5 score for emergency department visits due to asthma and at the same time a low tree canopy coverage rate of less than 10 percent. Tracts in the Tijuana River Valley and Nestor also had a 93.84 percent for fire risk.

In the future the city plans to add a function to its map so that residents can input their addresses to get their community’s scores.

Vianney Ruvalcaba, transportation and planning coordinator with the City Heights Development Corporation, said the city’s efforts to allocate resources based on the index numbers is a step in the right direction.

“We are excited to see the city actually putting equity under practice when it comes to the Climate Action Plan,” said Ruvalcaba.

The city of San Diego adopted its Climate Action Plan in 2015 with the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2035.

Esperanza Gonzalez, who lives in the neighborhood of Talmadge on the border of City Heights, said she hopes the city will improve its approach to equity but it’s crucial that residents speak up.

She walked in Teralta East recently, pointing out the lack of trees, the abundance of auto repair shops near homes and the broken sidewalks.

“A lot of things are missing in this community,” she said. “We want equity.”

Carolina Martinez, policy director with the Environmental Health Coalition, said the equity index is a step forward but she is concerned that it does not account for air quality.

“The climate crisis hits environmental justice communities first and worst,” Martinez said. “The solutions need to be focused in those communities because they are the most impacted.”

The city previously used other factors to identify “communities of concern” — such as the census blocks eligible for Community Development Block Grants, the tracts identified in the top 30th percentile of the state’s CalEnviroScreen, which measures air pollution, and the areas within half a mile of affordable housing.

Roberto Carlos Torres, climate equity specialist with the city’s Sustainability Department, said those methods vaguely defined areas of concern, but the equity index refines such areas of priority with 35 indicators chosen by the city and stakeholders.

“Now I could tell you that if we wanted to do something in City Heights, Teralta East should be the top priority in City Heights,” Torres said.

Torres said the equity index captures what equity looks like now and provides a tool to track progress over time.

“I think this data is a great first step to really changing and impacting people’s quality of life,” Torres said. “It gives the city a tool to just understand where we need to put in more investment in order to equalize the playing field for all of San Diego residents.”