

# Greauxing Resilience at Home

City of Columbia, South Carolina:  
**Columbia Compass: Envision 2036 and Affordable Housing Task Force**



GEORGETOWN CLIMATE CENTER



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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

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Louisiana is one of the hardest-hit areas in the United States as extreme weather events and regular flooding become more frequent and intense.<sup>1</sup> These challenges often fall “first and worst” on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color or “BIPOC” and low-income communities.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true in the U.S. Gulf Coast region and the state of Louisiana.

Over time, these challenges are being exacerbated by population increases and transitions as climate and non-climate drivers (e.g., people moving out of urban centers into more rural areas) influence where people choose — or are able — to live.

In southeast Louisiana, resilient, affordable housing initiatives are critical to ensuring equitable adaptation that takes into consideration the myriad overlapping challenges facing all Louisianans, but especially those living in communities that have long borne a disproportionate burden of risk.

Over a two-year period between fall 2020 and spring 2022, **Capital Region Planning Commission** and **Georgetown Climate Center** partnered with dozens of people from government, private, and nonprofit sectors and community stakeholders in Region Seven of the **Louisiana Watershed Initiative**.<sup>3</sup> The result of that partnership effort is **Greauxing Resilience at Home: A Regional Vision**<sup>4</sup> (Regional Vision), a resource to inform Region Seven’s ongoing work to increase community resilience by promoting affordable housing and nature-based solutions.

Regional and local governments in Region Seven can use the Regional Vision to identify potential legal, planning, and policy tools and projects to increase the affordability and availability of housing and the use of nature-based solutions. In addition, the Regional Vision offers insights for policymakers across Louisiana, throughout the Gulf Coast region, and nationally.

This report is composed of 24 individual case studies developed by Georgetown Climate Center to support the Regional Vision. These case studies describe best and emerging practices, tools, and examples from Louisiana and other U.S. jurisdictions to make progress on these complex and challenging issues. These case studies are intended to provide transferable lessons and ideas for regional and local governments addressing housing and mitigating flood risk as integrated parts of comprehensive community resilience strategies. Collectively, these case studies present a suite, although not an exhaustive list of tools and approaches that can be used to facilitate any of these efforts.

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1 STATE OF LA., LOUISIANA CLIMATE ACTION PLAN: CLIMATE INITIATIVES TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNOR 15–16 (Feb. 2022), available at <https://gov.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/CCI-Task-force/CAP/ClimateActionPlanFinal.pdf>.

2 See *id.* at 15–17.

3 The Louisiana Watershed Initiative is an effort to create a paradigm shift in floodplain management towards a strategy that approaches flood risk reduction from a nature-based solutions and land-use-based approach. A part of this approach includes identifying eight separate regional watershed management areas to assist in achieving cross-jurisdictional activities.

Region Seven is one of these eight watershed regions. Region Seven encompasses the upper part of the toe of Louisiana’s boot. It spans eastward from the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge across the Northshore (i.e., north of Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas) to Mississippi and along the Mississippi River to the Bonnet Carré Spillway. The region includes 13 parishes and 45 incorporated municipalities.

4 To reflect their connection to Louisiana’s cultural heritage, the project team and members of Region Seven that participated in this process chose to use the word “Greaux,” a French-inspired phonetic spelling of the word “Grow,” to brand this product.

Where possible, all the case studies share a consistent organizational format to allow easier cross-comparison of tools, processes, and takeaways:

- The **Background** section introduces the regional and local context (e.g., location, demographics) for each case study, including the following facing each jurisdiction: extreme weather risks, housing and environmental challenges, and development pressures.
- The **Housing** section focuses on the legal, planning, and policy tools and projects that have been designed and implemented to support the growth and preservation of housing affordability and availability.
- The **Environment** section highlights how vulnerable habitats like floodplains and other open spaces are being restored, conserved, and protected as a part of comprehensive resilience strategies to provide important ecosystem and community benefits like reducing flood risk and creating community assets, such as parks and trails.
- The **Community Engagement** section summarizes how governments have provided different types of public engagement opportunities and how affected residents have contributed to these planning and decisionmaking processes.
- The **Funding** section identifies how the programs, plans, and projects discussed have been funded by federal, state, and local government and private and nongovernmental sources.
- The **Next Steps** section captures the anticipated future actions that featured case study jurisdictions may take in implementing these tools and strategies.
- The **Considerations and Lessons Learned** section concludes with the primary takeaways from each example that other regional and local policymakers and communities may consider when developing or implementing their own housing and resilience strategies using these legal, planning, and policy tools.

A few additional notes about the case studies:

- **The case studies selected prioritize relatable and scalable models from places similar to Louisiana:** Wherever possible, Georgetown Climate Center aimed to acknowledge and lift up the work of jurisdictions and nongovernmental actors in Region Seven and neighboring watershed regions to inspire peer-to-peer sharing and actions from as close to home as possible. These resources are drawn from 12 states, with an emphasis on regions and local areas in the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic: Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Examples and lessons drawn from these regions are easiest to apply to a Louisianan context because they feature similar geography or analogous impacts from flooding and other climate effects.
- **There are no perfect, “one-size-fits-all” solutions:** While the case studies and resource entries informing the Region Vision are instructive for Region Seven and beyond, none of them are “perfect” examples of how to solve these complex and challenging issues. Georgetown Climate Center found no single case study or resource that provides a point-for-point or model for what Region Seven is trying to accomplish. No other jurisdiction identified is currently trying to integrate housing, flooding, equity, resilience, and population changes together in a single plan, ordinance, or policy. However, some jurisdictions are moving in that direction, or are making progress on discrete elements of what will eventually become a more holistic strategy. Therefore, this report and the Regional Vision draw analogous connections and recommendations that can be combined to facilitate more comprehensive planning and land-use efforts.

The case studies in this report were informed by interviews with practitioners and community leaders in charge of designing and overseeing this work. No statements or opinions, however, should be attributed to any individual or organization included in the *Acknowledgements* section of this report.

It is also important to note that the examples described in each case study are ongoing and the content included in this report is current as of spring 2022. For future updates about these and other case studies and the Regional Vision, please visit [Greaxing Resilience at Home: A Regional Vision](#) and Georgetown Climate Center’s [Adaptation Clearinghouse](#).

# *City of Columbia, South Carolina*

## **Columbia Compass: Envision 2036 and Affordable Housing Task Force**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In recent years, the City of Columbia, South Carolina has made several strides to address its affordable housing challenges. In 2020, the city updated its comprehensive plan, which includes 12 discrete recommendations for preserving and producing affordable housing in the region. Simultaneously, in 2020 the city convened a new Affordable Housing Task Force to provide housing experts and stakeholders an opportunity to help shape local housing initiatives, as well as to rethink traditional notions of “affordable housing.” Columbia serves as an example of how cities can deploy an arsenal of resources — comprehensive plans, community Task Force groups, and even examples from other cities — to address ongoing affordable housing challenges. By creating opportunities for collaborative and locally informed approaches to housing, municipalities can better understand the housing needs of its residents, as well as provide more holistic solutions for long-term housing security by bringing to the table stakeholders with diverse resources and expertise.

### **BACKGROUND**

The City of Columbia is South Carolina’s state capital and second most populous city.<sup>1</sup> The city’s population of close to 133,000 residents is very nearly equally split between renters and homeowners.<sup>2</sup> Of the homeowners, over 90 percent live in single-family detached homes.<sup>3</sup> In a city where approximately half of its residents are renters, the decline in rental affordability will require significant resources to increase the availability of adequate and affordable housing.

Like many parts of the country, Columbia faces rising housing costs, with both rent and housing prices outpacing household income. Between 1996 and 2016, the median rent increased by 59 percent, while the median home value rose by 67 percent — both outpacing the 38 percent increase in median income within the same number of years.<sup>4</sup> These trends significantly reduce both the

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<sup>1</sup> *QuickFacts: Columbia, South Carolina, U.S.* CENSUS BUREAU, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/columbiacitysouthcarolina> (last visited Jan. 22, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> CITY OF COLUMBIA, S.C., COLUMBIA COMPASS: ENVISION 2036 222 (2020), available at <http://www.columbiacompass.org/uploads/1/1/8/8/118862009/04-housing.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 225.

affordability of the rental market, as well as the ability of current renters to afford a down payment for future homeownership. Similar to other experiences across the country, the city has also experienced gentrification in recent decades, resulting in the displacement of historically Black neighborhoods, particularly those surrounding the University of South Carolina campus.<sup>5</sup>

Extreme weather has also threatened housing stability in Columbia, and, in recent years, even loss of life. In October 2015, South Carolina experienced record rainfall associated with Hurricane Joaquin, leading to 20 inches of rain in some areas of the state and incurring nearly \$1.5 billion in damages.<sup>6</sup> The flooding caused 19 fatalities in the region, many vehicle-related or due to drowning. In Columbia, floodwaters completely submerged homes and many residents were displaced, some permanently.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to disaster events like flooding, Columbia also faces more chronic climate-driven hazards. The city, once nicknamed with the slogan “Famously Hot” until it was rebranded in 2017, frequently experiences extreme heat days.<sup>8</sup> A 2019 study found that, across the state, residents experience an average of 14 days each year during which the heat index exceeds 100 degrees, a number that may quadruple by 2050.<sup>9</sup> Among the impacted South Carolina residents, people of color are the most chronically and severely impacted by extreme temperatures, comprising approximately 40 percent of outdoor workers (e.g., individuals who work in construction, agriculture, and occupations that are more likely to be affected by dangerous heat).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Varsha Gowda, *USC is gentrifying Columbia*, DAILY GAMECOCK (Sep. 6, 2021), <https://www.dailygamecock.com/article/2021/09/column-usc-is-gentrifying-columbia-opinion-gowda>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. DEP’T COMM. & NAT’L OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ASS’N, THE HISTORIC SOUTH CAROLINA FLOODS OF 2015 (July 2016), *available at* [https://www.weather.gov/media/publications/assessments/SCFlooding\\_072216\\_Signed\\_Final.pdf](https://www.weather.gov/media/publications/assessments/SCFlooding_072216_Signed_Final.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Tai Wong, *6 years later: Remembering the thousand year flood in Columbia*, WLTX.COM (Oct. 4, 2021, 7:16 PM), <https://www.wltx.com/article/news/local/flood-recovery/remembering-the-2015-flood-six-years-later/101-52d180f4-5245-4ea8-bfb9-442a4b68ed02>.

<sup>8</sup> *Columbia is ‘Famously Hot’ no more as group unveils new branding efforts*, WISTV.COM (Mar. 15, 2017, 3:12 PM), <https://www.wistv.com/story/34864413/columbia-is-famously-hot-no-more-as-group-unveils-new-branding-efforts/>.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Motsinger, *Famously hot: not just Columbia, yeah that Greenville and Anderson. Why SC may get hotter*, GREENVILLE NEWS (Sep. 23, 2019, 8:38 AM), <https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/2019/09/23/sc-gets-hotter-columbia-greenville-anderson-extreme-heat-national-weather-service-forecast/2120020001/>.

<sup>10</sup> In one 2021 study, African American, Black, Hispanic, or Latino outdoor workers in South Carolina may lose as much as \$23.5 billion in annual earnings by 2050 if current climate trends persist. The average loss of income for an outdoor worker due to extreme heat will be approximately \$2,300 annually. *Extreme Heat Could Threaten \$1.1 Billion Annually in South Carolina Outdoor Worker Earnings by Midcentury*, UNION CONCERNED SCIENTISTS (Aug. 15, 2021), <https://www.ucsusa.org/about/news/extreme-heat-could-threaten-1-1-billion-annually-south-carolina-outdoor-worker-earnings>.



# OVERVIEW OF COLUMBIA COMPASS: ENVISION 2036 AND COLUMBIA AFFORDABLE HOUSING TASK FORCE

In 2020, Columbia’s City Council adopted the city’s updated comprehensive plan, referred to as Columbia Compass: Envision 2036 (Envision 2036).<sup>11</sup> Similar to the previous 2008–2018 comprehensive plan, Envision 2036 sets forth the city’s strategic planning goals under nine separate “Elements”: housing, population, natural resources, economic development, transportation, land use, community facilities, cultural resources, and priority investment. Each Element drives city priorities in key areas of housing, land use, infrastructure, and other development.

The parts that follow go into more depth on the Housing Element and Columbia’s Affordable Housing Task Force, which was created shortly after the adoption of Envision 2036 to help guide implementation of the plan and development of the city’s affordable housing priorities more generally.

## HOUSING

### Planning

Developed with input from an unspecified number of housing stakeholder and focus groups, the recommendations under the Housing Element centered around five guiding principles: (1) increasing walkability and neighborhood connectivity; (2) resourcing underserved neighborhoods; (3) preserving historical and cultural characteristics in existing communities; (4) increasing the development of “adequate and affordable housing”; and (5) diversifying the mix of housing stock and neighborhood choices for residents.<sup>12</sup>

Several of the 12 final recommendations focus on preventing neighborhood displacement, incentivizing the creation of affordable and multi-unit housing, and establishing a regional housing land trust.<sup>13</sup> While the substance of the recommendations varies, the most robust recommendations identify: the city agencies and other partners organizations responsible for implementing different recommendations; an estimated timeline for implementation; estimated cost ranges; data collection requirements; metrics for success; and cross references to other recommendations across other

<sup>11</sup> CITY OF COLUMBIA, S.C., COLUMBIA COMPASS: ENVISION 2036 (2020), <https://planninganddevelopment.columbiasc.gov/the-comprehensive-plan/>.

<sup>12</sup> CITY OF COLUMBIA, S.C., COLUMBIA COMPASS: ENVISION 2036 219 (2020), available at <http://www.columbiacompass.org/uploads/1/1/8/8/118862009/04-housing.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 228–47.



Elements. Significantly, most of the recommendations referenced case studies of other jurisdictions that have successfully implemented similar recommendations, drawing on experiences from not only other cities in the Southeast, but also as far away as the state of Washington.

Of the eight listed as a “high priority,” one of the most comprehensive recommendations was to “leverage public land and funding to develop affordable housing,” such as by working with the private sector to redevelop city-owned land for affordable housing.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, the recommendation highlighted similar measures in the City of Asheville, North Carolina, which allocated \$15 million out of a \$25 million affordable housing bond to fund the repurposing of city-owned properties for affordable housing. To deploy this strategy in Columbia, Empower 2036 recommended a collaboration between the Columbia Housing Authority and private developers to identify and make available public land that is both suitable for development and also accessible to neighborhood amenities like transit and other services.<sup>15</sup> If successfully implemented, this recommendation would help increase the acquisition of public land for affordable housing and better meet the increasing demand for more affordable units across the city.

## Affordable Housing Task Force

Columbia’s Affordable Housing Task Force is a diverse body of community representatives that was formed in early 2020 to provide input to local housing decisions and recommend affordable housing priorities for the city, including for the implementation of the Housing Element.<sup>16</sup> Established and chaired by a member of the City Council, the Task Force is represented by 23 experts from multiple sectors, including: housing (Columbia Housing Authority, Midlands Housing Trust Fund, Homeless No More); transportation (COMET, or Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority); nonprofit (United Way); and law (SC Appleseed Legal Justice).<sup>17</sup> Importantly, the Task Force is also represented by current affordable housing residents who have the lived expertise and are best positioned to understand affordable housing needs in the city.<sup>18</sup>

Since its formation, the Task Force has met regularly to discuss shared priorities for affordable housing in Columbia, as well as to better understand the housing ecosystem and potential solutions for the city’s affordable housing shortage. Activities have included meeting with city staff to

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 241.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Sullivan & Christine Bartruff, *Local organizations seeking solutions to Columbia’s affordable housing crisis*, CAROLINA NEWS & REP. (Dec. 6, 2021), <https://carolinanewsandreporter.cic.sc.edu/local-organizations-building-solutions-to-columbias-affordable-housing-shortage/>.

<sup>17</sup> Julia Kauffman, *New Columbia task force is tackling affordable housing issues*, WLTX.COM (Jul. 3, 2020, 6:38 PM), <https://www.wltx.com/article/news/local/new-columbia-task-force-tackling-affordable-housing-issues/101-8cf60f78-3008-46eb-9e95-fa2ca9b6d2bc>.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

discuss the development and implementation of Envision 2036, as well as learning about affordable housing measures being taken in other cities, such as the use of voter-approved housing bonds in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the adoption of inclusionary zoning ordinances in Atlanta, Georgia.

Similar to the City of Austin, Texas and other localities, Columbia's Affordable Housing Task Force has also debated a revision to the term and definition of affordable housing used by the city — specifically, to replace “affordable” with “attainable” in order to reduce any social stigma that may be attached to “affordable housing.”<sup>19</sup> While the term “affordable” was ultimately preserved, the Task Force adopted a new definition of affordable housing to help facilitate improved communication and clearer expectations for prioritizing affordable housing solutions in the city, both among city government staff, as well as within members of the affordable housing community. The revised definition now reads: “Affordable housing consists of inclusive, equitable, and safe spaces to live, for owners and renters, priced such that all Columbians can afford necessities of living and fully engage in our community.” This new definition replaced the definition used prior to August 2021, which defined affordable housing as “a continuum of equitable, inclusive, and quality rental and homeownership opportunities for people at every income level, which is critical to creating safe, complete, and thriving communities.”<sup>20</sup> Under the new definition, the Task Force placed additional emphasis on the role of affordable housing in creating “safe spaces,” and introduced the “necessities of living” and ability to “fully engage” in the community as central ideas in affordable housing.

Within six months, the Task Force developed a set of preliminary recommendations to help the City Council and other local stakeholders set priorities for affordable housing. The preliminary recommendations included using city bonds to create a housing trust fund, and advocating for the South Carolina state legislature to adopt enabling legislation that permits local governments to adopt inclusionary zoning ordinances.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the Task Force recommendations — including the revised definition to the city's use of “affordable housing” — are advisory in nature and lack legal force absent additional measures by the Columbia City Council that can operationalize the recommendations. As of January 2022, the Task Force's recommendations still await formal adoption by the Columbia City Council.

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<sup>19</sup> *An update of Columbia's affordable housing community, including Allen Benedict Court redesign*, WLTX.COM (Aug. 11, 2021, 11:39 AM), <https://www.wltx.com/article/news/politics/columbia-southcarolina-affordable-housing-task-force-meets/101-0552a953-0934-4039-8790-6fbe69ab27e5>.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> As of January 2022, a bill to enact the proposed “South Carolina Inclusionary Zoning Act” is still under review in the Judiciary Committee of the South Carolina State Senate. South Carolina Inclusionary Zoning Act, S. 0258, 124th Leg., Reg. Sess. (S.C. 2021).

## CONSIDERATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Municipalities that are aiming to increase efforts to preserve and create more affordable housing could consider adopting a local comprehensive or master plan to help create the blueprint for land use and housing policies that center the preservation and creation of affordable housing as a priority. As demonstrated under Columbia's Envision 2036, the process of developing a comprehensive plan is also an opportunity to coordinate with private and nongovernmental stakeholders and adopt a common framework for identifying housing solutions that require cross-sector collaboration.

In addition to inviting public participation through the comprehensive planning process, local governments can also convene a specialized task force of housing stakeholders to provide more localized input on housing opportunities and initiatives. In doing so, the task force can help build capacity and contribute nongovernmental resources and expertise toward better implementation outcomes. To help ensure accountability, cities could consider appointing standing positions on a task force to enable greater continuity of leadership between successive political administrations, as well as to help operationalize the task force's recommendations.

Local housing stakeholders that would like to adopt a more holistic and comprehensive framework for affordable housing solutions can also consider adopting a more nuanced definition of "affordable housing." The updated definition adopted by the City of Columbia's Affordable Housing Task Force does not replace the technical definition set and commonly used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and local housing authorities (i.e., as a percentage of income).<sup>22</sup> However, a more expansive, localized, and community-based definition of affordable housing can help housing experts clarify priorities and expectations for all stakeholders, including local government, developers, landlords, tenants, and homeowners. Importantly, a revised definition of affordable housing creates an opportunity to emphasize the other associated costs that must be considered to make housing truly affordable, for example, access to transportation, grocery stores, jobs, and schools.

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<sup>22</sup> *Glossary of Terms to Affordable Housing*, U.S. DEP'T OF HOUSING & URBAN DEV. (Aug. 18, 2011), <https://archives.hud.gov/local/nv/goodstories/2006-04-06glos.cfm#:~:text=Affordable%20Housing%3A%20Affordable%20housing%20is,Reference%3A%20www.hud.gov.>