



community
land
conservancy

COMMUNITIES OF COLOR WORKING TOGETHER TO CLOSE THE NATURE GAP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Access to nature is vital for health, well-being, and social cohesion.

This important issue is often overlooked in discussions about equitable access to affordable housing, particularly for historically underserved communities and communities of color¹, where many live in fear of displacement.

Racist policies such as redlining have caused low-income neighborhoods to have much less green space than well-off neighborhoods. At the same time, our communities often fear that adding parks and open space will increase property values and thereby contribute to further displacement. This leaves a false choice between housing stability and access to nature.

This is why the **Community Land Conservancy (CLC)** is proposing to create a land conservancy led by people of color that acts as an accredited representative of marginalized communities and enables us to:

- Acquire, own and design public open space to serve the needs of our communities
- Advocate for the simultaneous development of affordable housing and quality, publicly-accessible open space
- Benefit from partnerships with established conservancies, while maintaining authority over land use projects

People of color have been largely excluded from land use decision-making for a range of historical reasons, including discrimination, a deep mistrust of government and outside organizations, and a lack of credentials and expertise to advocate for ourselves on development issues.

Addressing these challenges will require an organization with **three indispensable attributes:**

1. TRUST

An entity that is of, by, and for people of color will have the implicit trust of marginalized communities and will build on a history of community activism and an understanding of how to work sensitively and accountably in these neighborhoods.

2. EXPERTISE

Through accreditation as a land trust, the CLC will be eligible to receive funds to acquire and hold land on behalf of communities of color. CLC staff will have expertise in land use law, real estate development, and finance and will be able to confidently navigate the political landscape of land use decision-making.

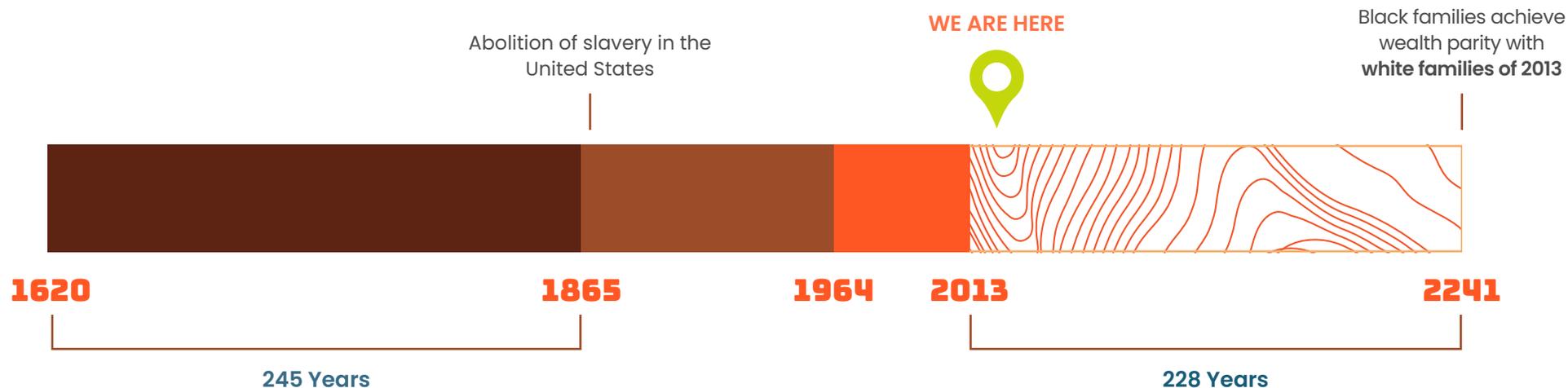
3. CAPACITY

We envision a small core staff that will subcontract with more established land conservancies to add capacity on specific projects. This shift in the historical power dynamic will be crucial to amplifying the voice of communities that currently must appeal to established land trusts and accept their terms of support.

1. There is no ideal umbrella term for this — for instance, not all communities of color are low income, underserved, or disadvantaged and communities of color are not a monolith. That said, what we do share is the burden of hundreds of years of white supremacy in the United States and overall lower socioeconomic status than white communities. Therefore, we are using the imperfect term “communities of color” to refer to these overlapping groups that are currently and have been historically underserved by U.S. society.

WEALTH GAPS AND NATURE GAPS

A [2016 report](#) on the racial wealth divide in the United States found that it would take the average Black family 228 years to amass the amount of wealth that the average white family had in 2013. A long legacy of discrimination against people of color lies at the heart of this wealth gap, including unequal access to educational and business opportunities and tax benefits, employment discrimination, and racial bias in the criminal justice system.



ADAPTED FROM IPS, 2016

Efforts to address inequities in urban land use tend to focus on housing affordability and preventing displacement. While this is understandable given the social and economic disruption that displacement causes, the lack of attention to open space in development planning is particularly harmful given the benefits of nature to individual and societal well-being – including better birth and child development outcomes, performance in school, mental health, and social connectedness. All of these factors affect the ability of individuals and communities to escape poverty and accumulate wealth.

The same historic inequities that created the wealth gap have resulted in a “nature gap.” Environmental injustice is reflected through the fact that polluting industries are located near our communities, while wealthier neighborhoods benefit from trails and recreation areas. Affordable housing policies also tend to deprioritize open space – green space is a low priority with tight profit margins. And when economic reinvestment *does* occur, improvements to green space may contribute to displacement of communities of color.

This is why we believe that decoupling nature access from socioeconomic status will require a people of color-led conservancy, one that is able to disrupt the systemic and institutional ruts that land-use decisionmaking processes are stuck in.

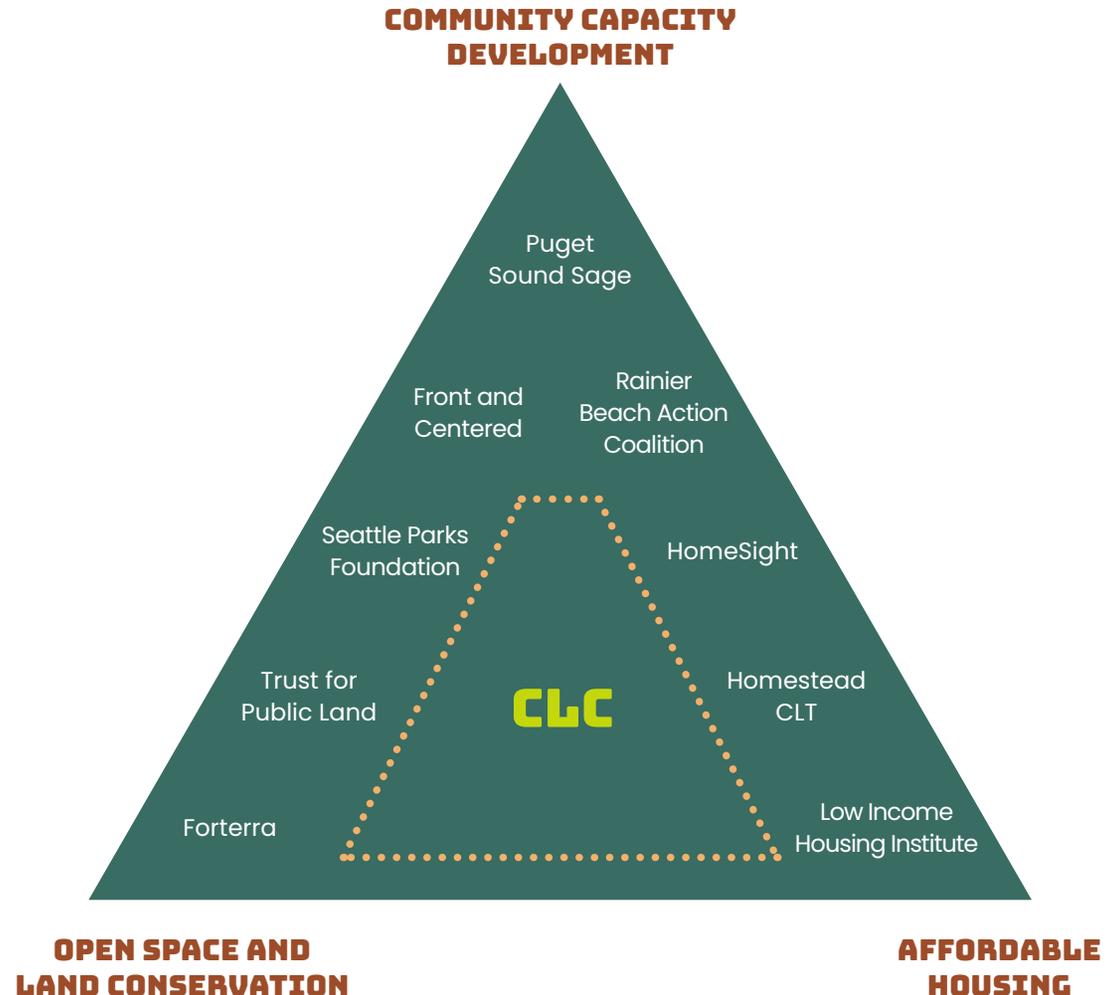
WHY CREATE SOMETHING NEW?

We believe the CLC will fill an important void in the institutional landscape. Currently:

- **Established conservancies** have historically focused on environmental concerns rather than benefits to people. Adapting business models and operations to work in communities of color is challenging and are often resisted by trustees and board members as “mission creep.”
- **Community development organizations** are generally overstretched in the critical and challenging work of community engagement and capacity-building.
- **Affordable housing organizations** are occupied with the technical and logistical burden of development, although some would pursue open space opportunities and green incentives if they could work with a partner that has the appropriate expertise.

The CLC will play a unique role by acting as a trusted and credentialed voice amplifier for our communities in a landscape dominated by white-led organizations. We anticipate strategic partnerships with all three types of institutions listed above, to maximize the potential for open space as part of, or in close proximity to, current and future development.

CLC within King County's Institutional Landscape

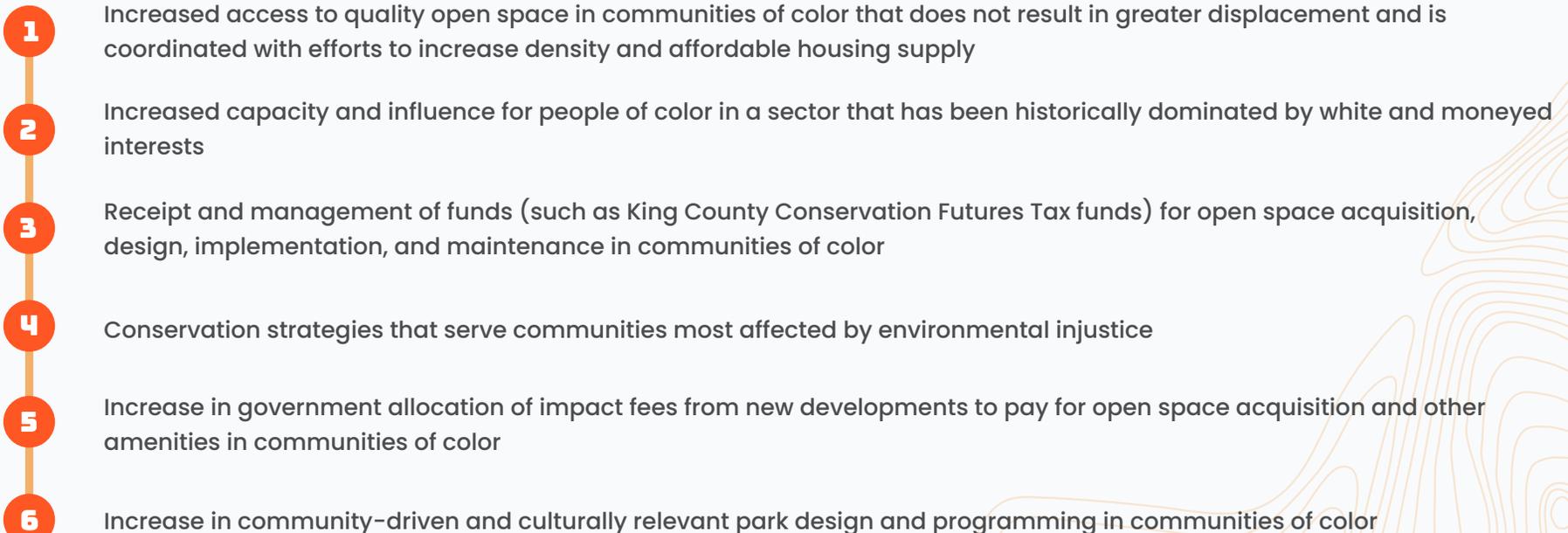


TRUST AND AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIP

Land use policy is complex, and many of our communities and organizations lack the capital, capacity, and expertise to seize opportunities to acquire land or initiate park redevelopment efforts. We are often deeply mistrustful of the very organizations that could support us, due to a long history of being let down by public and private organizations that have failed to adapt their policies to accommodate community concerns and goals.

As an organization led by people of color, the CLC will aim to increase the agency of our communities in land use decisions so that our local knowledge drives strategies to address root causes of environmental injustice and a lack of green space.

The CLC's measures of success will include:

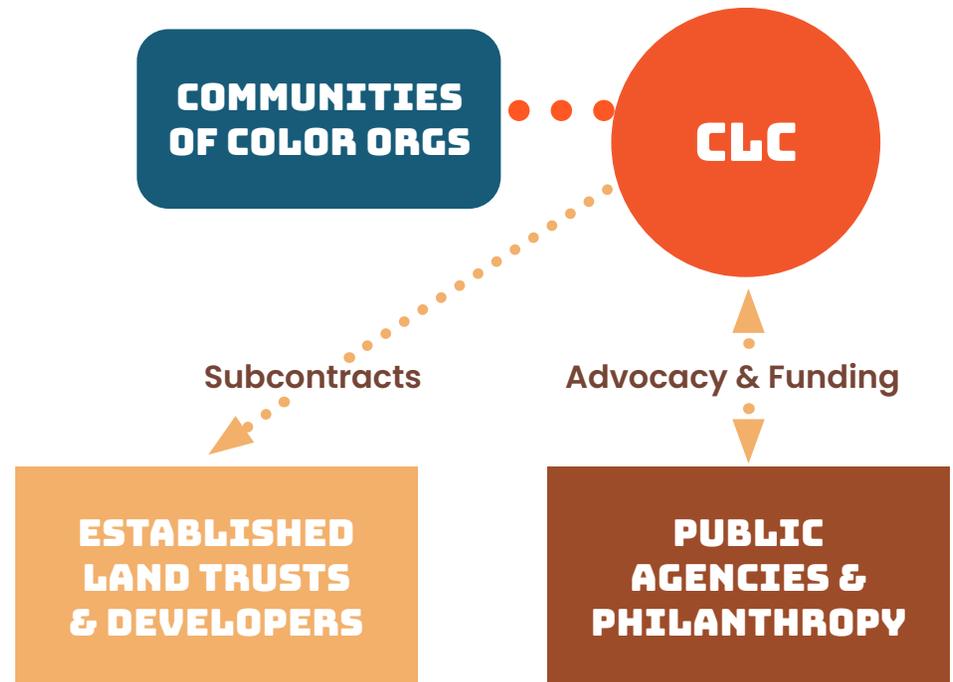
- 1 Increased access to quality open space in communities of color that does not result in greater displacement and is coordinated with efforts to increase density and affordable housing supply
 - 2 Increased capacity and influence for people of color in a sector that has been historically dominated by white and moneyed interests
 - 3 Receipt and management of funds (such as King County Conservation Futures Tax funds) for open space acquisition, design, implementation, and maintenance in communities of color
 - 4 Conservation strategies that serve communities most affected by environmental injustice
 - 5 Increase in government allocation of impact fees from new developments to pay for open space acquisition and other amenities in communities of color
 - 6 Increase in community-driven and culturally relevant park design and programming in communities of color
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STAFF STRUCTURE

We anticipate a small staff with these key functions:

- Supporting communities of color by using the CLC’s legal authority to receive funds, hold land, and broker acquisition and development deals
- Subcontracting established land trusts and developers to enlist their technical support (with close oversight)
- Fundraising, advocacy, and coordination with agencies and funders

Staff will include an executive director, a director of strategic partnerships, and a contract team of three to four subject matter experts on retainer, representing real estate finance, environmental and land use law, housing development, and landscape architecture.



FINANCING AND TAKEOUT

Most communities of color are eligible to waive the match requirement for acquisition funding through [King County’s Conservation Futures Tax \(CFT\) Levy](#) (see also [Open Space Equity Cabinet](#)). But even with this money, significant funds will be required for open space development. The CLC will advocate for public funding and seek philanthropic support to advance these projects. Ideally, the local community will be the ultimate takeout partner, but they will need financial support for insurance, operations, maintenance and for expertise and capacity development.

We anticipate that a fund of **\$15 million to \$20 million** will be needed for acquisitions, community capacity-building, and, if communities are takeout partners, ongoing stewardship and maintenance. This fund might be structured as an endowment or a revolving fund, but long timelines of land acquisition, design and implementation will require ongoing fundraising.

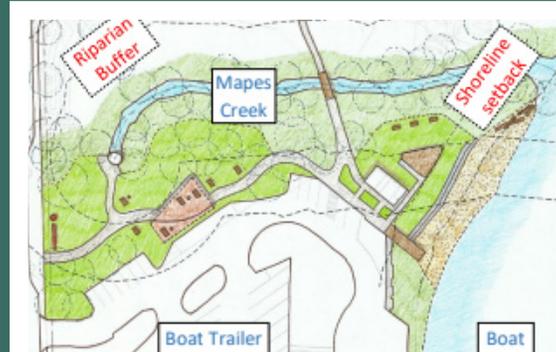
CASE STUDIES

Three Seattle case studies illustrate the unmet need for a people of color-led conservancy within a landscape dominated by white-led institutions. In all three cases, a CLC team – with an understanding of the community’s needs and the practices that perpetuate inequitable planning – could have added to the human, social and financial capital in these communities and perhaps resulted in a different outcome.



LIMITED COMMUNITY INFLUENCE ON ACQUISITIONS

Lake City community groups had limited capacity to advocate for community use of an existing building on a parcel of land acquired by the City for habitat restoration.



HISTORIC INEQUITIES IN POLICY INFLUENCE

The Rainier Beach community has been heavily constrained in enhancing lake access at a local park because parking lot islands were designated “wetland” – despite the community’s intention to expand wetland area.



BARRIERS IN EARLY CONCEPTUAL DESIGN PHASES

An opportunity for a vibrant public commons and restored wetland area in the Lake City business district was shelved before it was formally pursued because of a design challenge that well-off neighborhoods are commonly able to overcome.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Land use decisions made now will have far-reaching impacts as regional populations continue to grow and governments are forced to address climate change, while maintaining the ecosystems that undergird our economy and wellbeing. If these decisions are made under the current regime of public policies and private interests, our communities will continue to be ignored, then displaced, to the least desirable neighborhoods – bearing the brunt of climate impact and environmental degradation.

Ending this cycle of marginalization, environmental injustice, and displacement will require radical empowerment of people of color in land use planning and decision-making. **We believe that a Community Land Conservancy, of, by, and for people of color would have the trust, expertise, and capacity to work effectively and sensitively with communities of color to transform land use planning, policy and practice.**

Our vision is a network of empowered communities of color engaging in land use decisions that will determine the future of Puget Sound – and who stands to benefit from these decisions. **The Community Land Conservancy is a crucial first step toward achieving this vision.**

THANK YOU & CONNECT WITH US

We are deeply grateful to the many community organizers, social justice leaders, and nonprofit and public agency staff who have met with us and reviewed this proposal. This work would not have been possible without funding from the **Seattle Foundation**, the **Cuyamaca Foundation** and personal investments from **Brad Brickman**.

This document was developed by **SM Watts Consulting, LLC** and the **CLC Advisory Committee**: **Niesha Brooks** (City of Tukwila), **Lylianna Allala** (Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment), **Paulina Lopez** (Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition), and **Brad Brickman** (Social Venture Partners).

To connect, contribute, or volunteer, please email info@communitylandconservancy.org.

To donate please click [here](#).