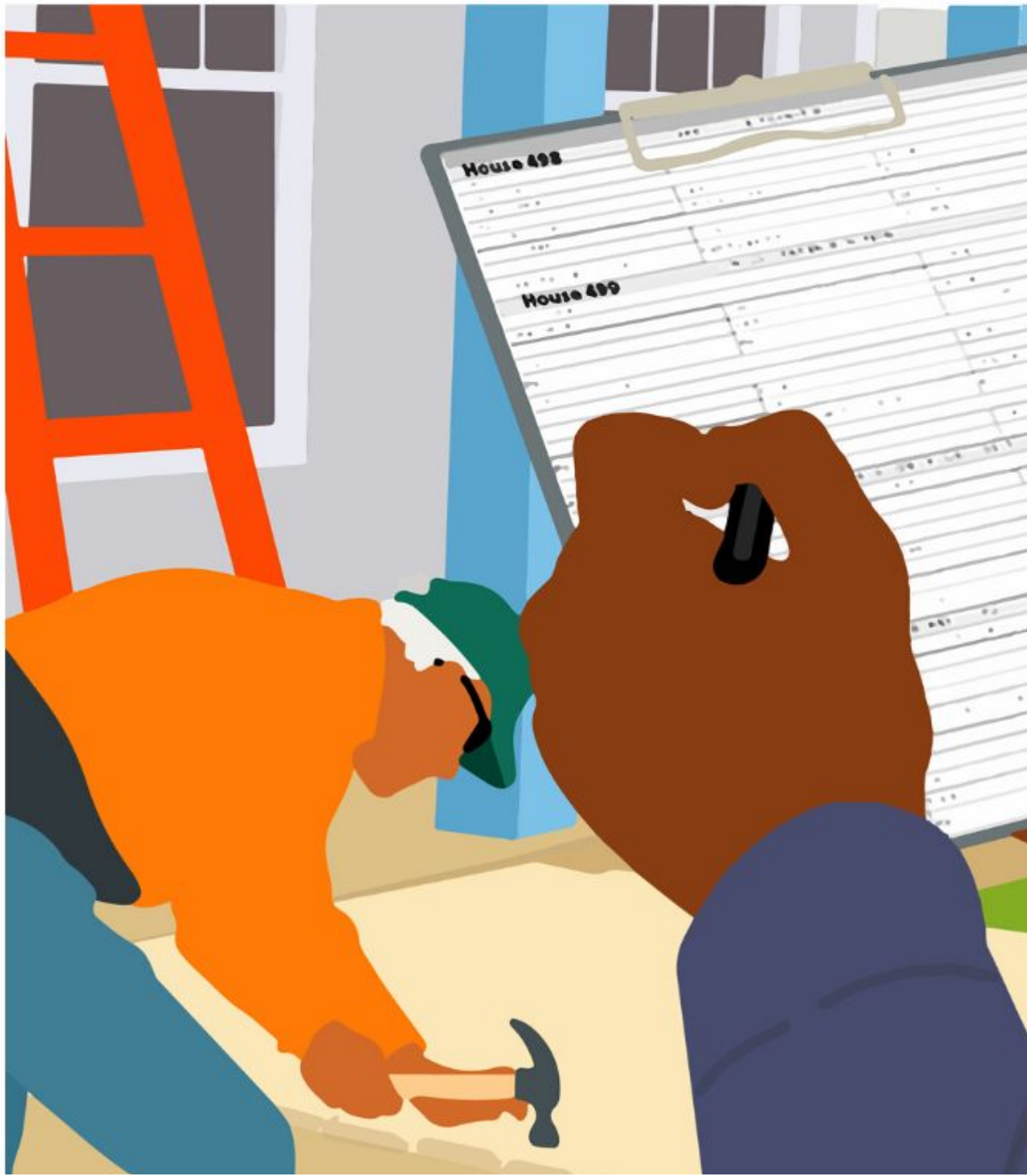


CREATING LASTING CHANGE IN A CLIMATE-ALTERED FUTURE

HARRIS THRIVES



CEER

COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENT
EQUITY, AND RESILIENCE

Creating Lasting Change in a Climate-altered Future

Climate equity is about recognizing that marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, which multiplies the effect of existing vulnerabilities of a population. Practicing climate equity requires those who are interested in being intentional about including communities' voices, stories, and actions to continuously be inclusive when it comes to the decision-making process needed to achieve measurable and sustainable solutions. The Coalition for Environmental, Equity, and Resilience's (CEER) most salient achievement in the fight to achieve climate equity in Harris County is the [Harris Thrives Resolution](#).

Established in 2019, the resolution directs the Harris County Flood Control District to create a framework for disaster recovery that benefits people and the planet. Created in collaboration with CEER, Texas Organizing Project, Bayou City Waterkeeper, Texas Housers, Texas Southern University, and the HOME Coalition, the resolution exemplifies why an equity analysis is critical to how the county addresses flood mitigation investments, particularly the county's 2018 Bond Program. CEER's work institutionalized the resolution's mandates in the long term so that Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) can adopt the approach across its investments, not just those funded by the \$2.5 billion bond project.

The Harris Thrives Resolution states that it is unacceptable to have neighborhoods that are ten times more protected than those where black, brown and lower-income Houstonians live. This is the result of a discriminatory federal policy



that calls for any flood mitigation project using federal money to conduct a cost-benefit analysis (CBA, also referred to by FEMA as BCA, which means benefit-cost analysis). The CBA requires a municipality to show the federal government what “bang for its buck” it will receive for a project. The benefit input is calculated using property value instead of human life. The benefit is determined as the difference between “losses avoided” before and after the mitigation project. Losses are higher on expensive homes so the avoidance of those losses is higher, resulting in more of a benefit. That means that low and moderate-income (LMI) areas cannot score high enough to receive federally funded flood mitigation money. The result is communities that are perpetually and systematically left behind as the conditions in their neighborhoods are compounded with each flood event. Implementing equity into flood relief work at the county level means analyzing the cost-benefit criterion and coming up with

a plan to address the woeful systematic disparities it creates. A locally sourced funding base, like the 2018 bond, can bypass federal restrictions and create an equitable distribution of resources.

The Harris Thrives Resolution calls for HCFCD to request additional resources to use to identify communities that are susceptible to flooding and inhabited by



LMI residents. HCFCD must combine its flood data with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) to prioritize vulnerable watersheds and economic and social shock averse communities. The coordination of these datasets creates a formula known as “worst-first” where the county has to prioritize localities with the greatest economic and environmental needs to receive recovery funds, first. In other words, the project will need to assess how much damage has been done, what-if anything-can be salvaged, and how to prevent the same occurrences moving forward.

The Harris Thrives Resolution calls for nature-based solutions that use existing environmental infrastructures to mitigate flood threats. The conservation and protection of prairies and wetlands, for example, are ways Harris county can protect both nature and people from flooding.

Flood infrastructure projects are vast physical transformations and

significant investments for neighborhoods. As its name suggests, the scope of HCFCD’s work is limited to flooding. CEER advocates in the resolution, however, expanding the boundaries of what HCFCD considers its purview to solve multiple problems at once. HCFCD can play a convener role to leverage these investments and their associated public engagement processes to identify what other community needs — housing, health, transportation, etc. — can be addressed by the county. We must look at both causation and correlation as variables to support the eradication of environmental challenges for our communities.

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The Harris Thrives Resolution calls for the re-imagining of a community task force that will advise HCFCD on how to incorporate equity into every step of the bond initiative. In the first year of the new task force, we anticipate a report on actions the HCFCD can take to address the [disparities among watersheds](#), and subsequently neighborhoods and those deemed as super neighborhoods. We also expect the county to extend an invitation to the community to define its own metrics for success for bond initiative projects. We are asking: *What would achieving equity look like to a worst-first neighborhood?* Community engagement will open the doors of government and HCFCD in ways that have never happened before.

Flooding is and will continue to be a major issue that communities need resolved, not just something for political candidates to puff up their campaigns. We

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need a solid solution for how the entire county shows up in service to the community and how we achieve community-centric forms of government. The Harris Thrives Resolution establishes a civic precedence that mandates a just system for all. ■

Click [here](#) for a timeline of the Harris Thrives Resolution.