Each year, EcoDistricts convenes city teams from across North America for a 3-day intensive, project-based workshop designed to accelerate district-scale urban regeneration projects.

This report provides a summary of the EcoDistricts Incubator experience across enrolled 11 project teams and 70 practitioners.

The Incubator is designed to bring the practice of enrolled teams to the next level, deepening their knowledge, challenging their assumptions and empowering them to adopt new approaches to community-driven development. Prior to attending, each project team was already hard at work promoting healthy, vibrant, sustainable and just cities in their neighborhood. Each team leaves the intensive with a customized and comprehensive EcoDistricts project roadmap.

Using the EcoDistricts Protocol as a guide, master facilitator Adam Beck led teams through interactive sessions on district governance, assessment, project development and management. The teams also heard from more than 35 faculty on topics ranging from creative finance and innovation districts to healthy places and equitable development. A Solutions Café connected participants with industry experts for interactive Q&A sessions on 12 diverse topics.

On day two, the teams toured Portland neighborhoods that are experimenting with some of the nation’s leading best practices in urban regeneration, including the Pearl District, the city’s bioswales and storm water management in Tanner Springs Park, the Lloyd EcoDistrict, and the adaptive reuse and economic development initiatives of the Central Eastside.

Throughout the event, attendees connected with fellow Incubator participants and faculty to share experiences and knowledge and create a strong network of urban regeneration peers.
Atlanta GA Neighborhood Planning Unit Y & Polar Rock. Led by local nonprofit SEED / Sustainable Lakewood, a 2400-acre collection of 11 underserved neighborhoods in NW Atlanta that has well-connected and green streets, long-term residents of diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, bus service and natural green spaces, including a 78-acre park. With the rebuilding of the economy and the publication of a comprehensive redevelopment plan, investment is pouring into the NPU to accelerate projects like park restoration, a Complete Streets plan, and local fresh food markets, grocery stores and community gardens.

Austin TX Central Health Brackenridge Campus. Led by the state agency Central Health, a 14-acre campus in a residential, ethnically diverse neighborhood in Central Austin that is experiencing rapid growth. The campus is a vital community asset that provides health care for vulnerable populations. Its redevelopment will include affordable housing and enhanced mobility options, a medical school, a new teaching hospital, a planned innovation zone with new facilities such as wet labs and incubator space and mixed-use development such as a hotel, entertainment, cafes and retail that will provide new jobs.

Birmingham AL Entrepreneurial District. Led by the City of Birmingham, an 86-acre plot of former railroad and industrial land that has been in disuse since the collapse of the iron and steel industry. The Entrepreneurial District was established in 2003 by the City of Birmingham to encourage the development of mixed-use, technology-related development, including a technology center and business incubation program and office, housing and retail spaces. With the redevelopment of surrounding land into Railroad Park and a growing number of technology and knowledge industry businesses, the district has become the centerpiece of the City’s strategy for downtown revitalization.

Burbank CA High-Speed Rail Station Area EcoDistrict. Led by the City of Burbank, a 540-acre TOD of largely industrial land and the site of a future California High-Speed Rail (HSR) station. The site is rich with transit potential, but in need of facilities for pedestrians, cyclists and transit users, as well as development that encourages sustainable design, a healthy ecology and job and housing creation. Expanded uses in the district will support workforce training programs and take advantage of existing aerospace manufacturing and media-related companies located in the district.

Fort Collins CO The Mason University District. Led by the Institute for the Built Environment, an 1165-acre area along the Mason Street corridor that connects downtown Fort Collins and the Colorado State University campus. The city recently adopted a Climate Action Plan with aggressive goals, including an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. To accelerate the goals, leaders are developing an EcoDistrict master plan for the UniverCity District that aims to create a unique identity for the district by developing “green district” design guidelines that incorporate artistic features, improve alleyways and parking, reduce development barriers and incorporate robust biodiversity.

Grand Fork ND Warehouse EcoDistrict and Grand Corridor Project. Led by Grand Forks Downtown Development Association, a 9-acre area adjacent to downtown Grand Forks that includes a 5-acre Warehouse EcoDistrict and the encompassing Grand Corridor Project, a 4-mile rapid transit corridor. This working-class area with a high population of US and international students contains dilapidated warehouses and housing that is in poor condition. The Warehouse EcoDistrict is the first phase of a broader project to connect people, jobs and activity through a development corridor that includes affordable housing, recreation, mixed-use development and light rail and pedestrian-friendly transit.

Rochester NY High Falls EcoDistrict. Led by nonprofit Greenentopia, a 210-acre revitalization effort of several disparate riverfront districts, each with its own characteristics and demographic makeup. Since the 1960s, these districts in particular have suffered from a lack of investments, high poverty rates and a derelict environment. However, Rochester recently became a Climate Smart Community, and with the relocation of the community college’s downtown campus, a sports complex, a burgeoning innovation center, a new greenway and a growing residential influx, High Falls is set to benefit from a progressive urban plan along with strategic investments that will help create a new sense of destination.

San Francisco CA Sustainable Chinatown Initiative. Led by the City of San Francisco, San Francisco’s Chinatown is one of the last affordable neighborhoods in an increasingly expensive city. Among Chinatown’s assets are its incredible density and its role as an immigrant gateway, cultural mecca and tourist destination. It is also home to low-income and foreign-born residents who face a high risk of displacement due to aging infrastructure and building stock. The Sustainable Chinatown Initiative will engage immigrant and mono-lingual communities to identify strategies that sustain Chinatown’s unique culture and affordability while increasing its environmental performance.

St. Louis MO Near North Side St. Louis (NNS). Led by nonprofit Urban Strategies, a 530-acre neighborhood, located just north of downtown St. Louis, that exhibits signs of distress, including low incomes, poor public health, high long-term vacancy, violent crime rates and underachieving schools. The area was awarded a $500,000 Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop a Transformation Plan that will promote projects that provide affordable housing, improve educational and health outcomes for children and families, increase opportunities for upward mobility and disconnected youth and create connections in the neighborhood, which serves as the primary gateway to downtown St. Louis.

Victoria BC Canada Food EcoDistrict (FED). Led by nonprofit Food Eco District, a 40-acre district in downtown Victoria, encompassing a neighborhood recognized for its vibrant small businesses and local food options. Led by local restaurateurs, FED has eight business members that are leaders in restaurant sustainability. The FED is focused on short-term urban agriculture projects that beautify the neighborhood, attract tourists and raise awareness about locally-sourced food, as well as long-term projects like increasing membership, bike kitchens, public green spaces, district energy, roof gardens and a food truck/biofuel initiative.

Washington DC Rhode Island Metro Improvement District. The Rhode Island Metro Improvement District is a small, rapidly changing neighborhood in northeast Washington, DC. The improvement district will help meet the demand for affordable housing in the neighborhood surrounding the Rhode Island Metro station. The neighborhood also includes other community assets. Greater Mount Calvary Holy Church provides community outreach programs, a school, a fellowship hall a bookstore and affordable housing. A strip-style shopping center houses vacant retail and land parcels crucial to future redevelopment in the neighborhood. Rhode Island Avenue/NE Main Street is one of eight Main Street programs in the District of Columbia. And the Metropolitan Branch Trail is a bicycle trail that loops around the northern half of Washington, DC and surrounding counties, bringing commuters and recreational cyclists to the neighborhood. The vision for the area is a mixed-income, mixed-use, walkable, equitable, sustainable neighborhood supported by green infrastructure.
Outcomes

After three days, teams wrapped up their Incubator experience and identified key takeaways and achievements. Since the Incubator, many teams have seen significant progress in their neighborhood regeneration efforts.

Atlanta, GA Neighborhood Planning Unit and Polar Rock. The team gathered for the first time at the Incubator and, with the help of their facilitator, decided to hone their focus on a specific part of their community. Since the event, they have seen broader community engagement thanks to city-led events in the community’s 78-acre park.

Austin, TX Central Health Brackenridge Campus. The team used the Incubator as an opportunity to gather multiple stakeholders together to connect for the first time. The Incubator also gave them a clear plan to create an executive-level advisory committee, and they’ve continued working with their Incubator facilitator beyond the event.

Fort Collins, CO Mason UniverCity District. The Incubator helped the Fort Collins team identify clear strategies around communicating the value of the project, especially in connection with other university and city initiatives. They also developed a list of action items around stakeholder engagement activities, including alignment on metrics and outcomes with the City around the Climate Action Plan.

Grand Forks, ND Grand Corridor and Warehouse EcoDistrict. The neighborhood’s plan was inspired by the Mason UniverCity District, and the two teams were able to forge valuable connections at the Incubator. The Warehouse district already has several developers interested in project implementation and borders a recently announced Arts District.

Rochester, NY High Falls EcoDistrict. The High Falls team has been hard at work since the Incubator. In addition to announcing the project as upstate New York’s first ecodistrict, they have envisioned a number of projects, including a 300-foot long native plant garden; a GardenAerial Zipline; and a Green Visions initiative, which works with community members to create flower gardens on abandoned lots. The flowers are harvested and sold, and participants split the profits.

St. Louis, MO Near North Side. The team identified neighborhood engagement and branding as an important task moving forward. Since the Incubator, they neighborhood has been identified as a Choice Neighborhood and received a planning grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Victoria, BC Food Eco District. The team left the Incubator with a solid plan to implement stakeholder engagement and asset mapping exercises to gain deep understanding of their project area and constituents. In August, 2015, they held a sold out FED launch party. They now have 8 restaurants as FED members and two satellite members.

Washington, DC Rhode Island Metropolitan Improvement District. The team, led by H Street Community Development Corporation, worked with facilitator Cat Goughnour, an expert equity consultant, on their plans for the low-income community that is seeing massive looming investments. Since the Incubator, developers have begun building multiple housing units, include a 116-unit affordable housing development.