

Turning Swords into Ploughshares

By the Community Coalition
for a Sustainable Concord

Every morning, Irma Cardenas watches her brother wake up at 4 a.m. to begin the four-hour commute to his construction job. “My brother leaves every day at 5 a.m.,” states Irma. “Sometimes, when there is a lot of traffic, he can be back by 10 p.m.” Irma and her family live in the Monument Corridor neighborhood in Concord, California. Located in Central Contra Costa County, northeast of Oakland in the Bay Area, Concord has a well-deserved reputation as a suburban, middle-class community. Nevertheless, for those who live in “La Monument,” an imaginary wall seems to surround their neighborhood.

“La Monument” houses more than 18,000 residents. Almost 52 percent of its residents are Latino; 83 percent of whom are renters. It is estimated that even though 93 percent of the people who live there are employed, 47.4 percent live under 185 percent of the poverty line, nearly triple the county rate. This translates to more than 8,500 Concord residents who can’t afford to pay for their basic needs, such as housing, food, utilities, health insurance, clothing, and education. In addition, Contra Costa has the highest commute times in the entire country for counties of comparable size. This is directly related to the lack of local jobs and explains why Irma’s brother spends four hours commuting to work, each way. Poorly planned, sprawling suburban development combined with a deteriorating employment base has created massive economic dislocation.

Irma is a leader with the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO). She says that the high commute times, lack of jobs, and high cost of living are not the only issues facing Concord. She notes that once local organizations got together to consider the re-use plan for the Concord Naval Weapons Station, they discovered that they shared more common ground than they imagined. Low-income immigrants had concerns about the environment and the need for open space for children to play. Environmentalists wanted local residents to get access to living-wage, union jobs in their own communities. Labor unions advocated increased affordable housing. Over a period of six months, coalition

members developed their own platform for the Concord Naval Weapons Station and a plan of action to take it to city officials. The group is called the Community Coalition for a Sustainable Concord and it is a powerful and diverse movement of a broad range of community organizations. (See authors’ credit at end of story for a full list.)

Go for the Whole Loaf

“If you approach elected officials in a piecemeal fashion, you end up fighting over the crumbs rather than the whole loaf,” said Bob Doyle, assistant general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District. “What a lot of folks are realizing is that they may not agree with each other on everything but working cooperatively in the process benefits everyone.”

In the flurry of planning for the future of the 5,028-acre Concord Naval Weapons Station, one issue is often glossed over—it is owned by the public. Community groups want to ensure that the impacts of development at the Weapons Station are balanced with clear public benefits—both in Concord and region-wide.

Early on in the process, the voices of community leaders were overshadowed in the mad scramble for the valuable land. In the winter of 2006, the City Council narrowly thwarted an effort by the Shaw Group to acquire the entire parcel from the Navy. The stakes are high. The Concord Naval Weapons Station is the largest development project currently proposed in the Bay Area.

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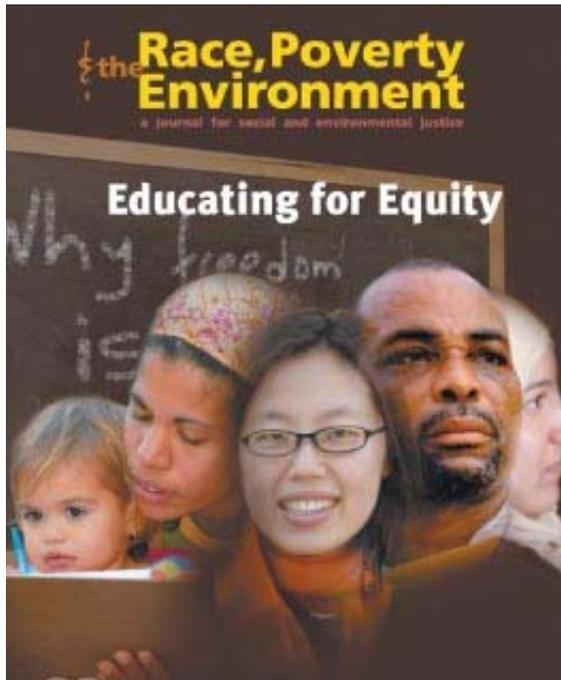
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The Community Coalition has the following comprehensive goals:

Parks and Natural Lands:

Preserve 80 percent of the Weapons Station as community parks and a new public regional park. Protect wildlife corridors and endangered species, designate a creek restoration area, and prohibit any new roads east of Mount Diablo Creek. Benefit all of the region's residents with sites for active recreation, sports fields, and museums.

Vibrant, Diverse, Walkable Neighborhoods:

Create walkable neighborhoods well-served by public transportation with a mix of jobs, shops, and homes serving a range of incomes. Cluster retail, office space, and homes around the North Concord BART station and also in villages farther from BART. Develop in a way that allows workers and residents to commute and do errands without a car, with safe streets, good bus service, trails, and bike lanes.

Affordable Homes and Homelessness Solutions:

Respond to the critical housing needs of Concord residents by dedicating at least 45 percent of housing developed at the Weapons Station as affordable, including 250 acres as permanently affordable housing.

Quality Jobs for Local Residents:

Create a mix of good jobs that pay family-supporting wages with benefits throughout all phases of the redevelopment. Target a high percentage of construction and new permanent jobs towards Concord residents.

Environmentally Sustainable Development:

Incorporate the highest standards in green building, green design, clean technology, and energy efficiency. Leverage this opportunity to prepare workers for careers in green technologies and green building.

Full Environmental Clean-Up:

Coordinate planning for housing, jobs, recreation, and habitat with a comprehensive environmental cleanup. Ensure informed public participation in the environmental remediation process to fully protect the health of Concord residents, workers, and visitors.

Strong Community-Driven and Inclusive Process:

Fulfill community needs and reflect everyone's aspirations through a community-driven planning process that is transparent, inclusive, multi-lingual, and representative of the community's diversity.

It is the City Council's responsibility to ensure that the Concord Naval Weapons Station re-use plan results in significant public benefits. The project must be integrated into the city and the region so it doesn't become a "New Concord" to the exclusion of existing residents.

In October 2007, Coalition members scored an early victory when over 150 members packed a City Council meeting to call for inclusion of alternative proposals in the environmental impact review. Dozens of coalition leaders from every segment of the community gave testimony in English and Spanish. Environmentalists talked about the importance of living wage jobs and affordable housing advocates talked about the importance of open space.

The alternatives were included in a decisive 3-1 vote handing a victory to the rapidly expanding Community Coalition for a Sustainable Concord. Now, coalition members have launched an ambitious community education plan to educate thousands of local residents about their vision for a healthy and sustainable Concord and are preparing for a series of mobilizations in the coming months as the city moves to finalize the re-use plan.

The re-use of the Weapons Station presents Concord and the surrounding region with a momentous opportunity to create a project that represents the vision and values of the community. The planning and design process can address the needs of Concord residents and fulfill priorities for open space, affordable housing, quality jobs, vibrant neighborhoods, and environmentally sustainable development. Given the broad impacts, it is critical for the benefits of the base re-use to be shared by the public throughout the city and region and promote inclusiveness and a high quality of life for all. ■

Community Coalition for a Sustainable Concord members include: ARC Ecology, Carpenters Local Union 152, Central Labor Council of Contra Costa County, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization, CNWS Neighborhood Alliance, East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, East Bay Housing Organization, Friends of Mount Diablo Creek, Greenbelt Alliance, Habitat for Humanity East Bay, Lutheran Social Services, Mount Diablo Audubon Society, Resources for Community Development, Save Mount Diablo, Sierra Club, and the Transportation and Land Use Coalition.