

Community Planning for Power

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Low-income communities of color have long struggled with racist, discriminatory land use practices that diminish health, safety, and quality of life. It is not uncommon to see residential areas opened up for industrial development, houses located next to freeways and toxic polluters, and new freeway development and truck routes targeted at these communities.

The question is: Do these communities have the power to change these zoning practices and revitalize their neighborhoods? How can they leverage their needs against developers and decision-makers seeking to gentrify their communities?

Empowering the Poor

The Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) has worked for nearly 30 years to empower poor communities to become meaningful participants in their neighborhood's policy decisions and development processes to:

- ensure healthy neighborhoods
- maintain and create affordable housing
- preserve community character and culture
- promote sustainable communities.

Some of our most effective organizing tools have been developed through our work in two largely Latino communities of San Diego County—Barrio Logan in the City of San Diego and Old Town in National City.

San Diego's Systematic Environmental Racism

The two communities of Barrio Logan and Old Town are plagued by the all-too-familiar problems prevalent in low-income communities of color: substandard housing, overcrowded schools, a lack of social services, and poor jobs. Also typical is the preponderance of polluting industries in residential and commercial neighborhoods—thanks to mixed-use zoning, which allowed auto body and chrome plating

shops, chemical supply houses, and woodworking and painting companies to locate adjacent to homes, schools, and parks—and lead contamination in the aging houses.

Systematic environmental racism since the turn of the century has shaped the development in these communities, where asthma-related hospitalization rates are two or three times higher than those for the rest of the county. The problems have been exacerbated more recently by the growth in international trade, leading to a huge spike in the number of diesel trucks crisscrossing the neighborhoods as they transport goods and raw materials to and from the Port of San Diego.

Wanted: A General Plan for Neighborhoods

Under California law, all municipalities are required to create a General Plan, providing a blueprint and a vision for the city. And although not required by law, there's no reason why General Plan standards should not be applied to determine matters of zoning, building density, and amenities for a neighborhood.

True, General Plans can be lofty and vague sometimes, but as a rule they are useful documents with clear objectives and we have frequently used them in EHC's community-driven planning efforts for two reasons: (a) it enables residents to be proactive instead of reacting to inappropriate development proposals; and (b) it allows residents to self-determine their communities, using their own values and aspirations.



“The plan will allow me to see the neighborhood change into something I remember when I was a boy, when a lot of residents were connecting with each other. In the mid-80s it changed for the worse—I saw houses flattened and autobody shops move in.”

José Medina, National City resident since 1969 and EHC leader, expressing his hopes for the Old Town Specific Plan

Strategies for Authentic Involvement

It’s obvious that authentic community involvement in every aspect of planning and visioning leads to better outcomes for neighborhoods and their residents. So, EHC has developed some core strategies, which combine community organizing and policy advocacy, with grassroots leadership development, research, and media communications to implement each strategic plan:

Community Action Teams: EHC’s first step is to establish a Community Action Team comprised of community leaders who help develop the community vision and priorities that direct EHC’s efforts. Team members serve as spokespersons for campaign meetings with elected officials and government agency representatives and on various planning committees established to oversee the plan development.

Salud Ambiental Líderes Tomando Acción (SALTA): a.k.a. Environmental Health, Leaders Taking Action, is an eight-session compulsory training program for all EHC leaders, providing them with the skills and knowledge to become effective advocates and community organizers. Another five-session SALTA focused on land use provides training on redevelopment, zoning, affordable housing, air quality, contaminated site clean-up, industrial pollution reduction, and sustainable building, including green building materials and renewable energy.

Community Surveying: EHC leaders use community surveying as a means for collecting and docu-

menting the priorities and needs of their neighbors. In Old Town, National City, for example, leaders surveyed residents to discover that affordable housing, relocation of auto body shops, and a change in zoning laws to prohibit incompatible mixed-use were the highest priorities by far, and incorporated these priorities into the community plan.¹

Community Visioning: When the leaders in Barrio Logan and Old Town, National City elected to develop their own neighborhood vision, EHC raised the funds to employ a land use planning firm, which worked with residents to develop detailed plans that included zoning changes, volume and affordability levels of new housing units, identification of industries for relocation, park acreage, and school requirements, among other things.

The Barrio Logan Vision is currently endorsed by over 1000 area residents, 28 community organizations, and 16 local businesses.² EHC also secured \$1.5 million from a neighboring downtown development agency to update and revise the official Barrio Logan Community Plan—which had not been updated since 1978—starting in early 2008.

Buffering Communities Against Pollution

For many years, EHC has promoted pollution prevention and the precautionary principle as the best solution for preventing toxic exposure. But the significant changes to industrial practices that are critical to environmental safety can take many years to

Photo:

EHC members march in support of the Barrio Logan Vision.

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Toxinformer
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Elvia Martinez, Master Plating's next door neighbor and EHC leader, says: "This is the way it's supposed to work... when a community works together to make its neighborhood a better place to live."

Barrio Logan and Old Town: Demographics and Community Description

The combined population of Barrio Logan and Old Town is approximately 10,000. The following chart uses 2000 census data to compare demographic information from the target communities to San Diego County as a whole:

Name of Community	People of Color	Families in Poverty	Renters	Age <18
Barrio Logan	97%	35%	72%	40%
Old Town	85%	20%	66%	30%
Combined Area	83%	23%	69%	32%
San Diego County	42%	9%	45%	26%

accomplish. So, communities subjected to toxic exposure because of discriminatory zoning practices need to take immediate action to protect themselves.

In 1990, EHC proposed the Toxic-Free Neighborhoods Ordinance for the City of San Diego, which would have required a buffer between industries using or emitting hazardous materials, and residences, schools, and day care centers.³ But it was defeated by local polluters who spent thousands of dollars on lobbying against the ordinance.

EHC then tried to target polluters who chronically violated the law. One of them was Master Plating, which had over 150 violations on the books. Concerted organizing efforts by the community resulted in the California Air Resources Board (CARB) monitoring the air quality around Master Plating to reveal a cancer risk four times higher than that of a "typical urban area" because of hexavalent chromium emissions. Master Plating was shut down in 2002 and CARB developed the Air Quality and Land Use Handbook of 2005, which recommends buffers for many polluters—for the first time in state or local regulatory history.⁴ (The recommended buffer for chrome platers is 1000 feet—996 feet further than the distance between Master Plating and the house next door!) The Handbook also recommends the separation of housing from major roadways, which is more difficult given the popularity of "transit-oriented development".

While rules for future zoning of sensitive areas are

important, it is equally important that polluters currently situated adjacent to homes and schools be removed or relocated in order to restore the residential neighborhoods. In National City, EHC was successful in convincing the city council to adopt an amortization ordinance that will phase out industries currently allowed to operate near sensitive use areas. It also sets up a process for relocation of prioritized industries when the amortization period is triggered.

Environmental Justice: It's All in the Planning

This article has provided a close look at EHC's strategies for involving and empowering residents in their own community planning processes with particular focus on reducing and eliminating toxic pollution threats. A plan for truly achieving environmental justice, however, must go further and address the critical issues of affordable housing and preserving community culture. EHC is grateful for the tools that were passed on to us by others and in turn, we are developing our own tools for pursuing affordable housing overlay zones, community land trusts, and other strategies to ensure that community plans enable current residents to remain in their neighborhoods. ■

Endnotes

1. EHC, *Toxinformer*, Summer 2005.
2. <http://www.environmentalhealth.org/TFNBarrioLoganNewVisionPlan.html>
3. EHC, *Toxic Free Neighborhoods Community Planning Guide*, 1993.
4. <http://www.arb.ca.gov/ch/handbook.pdf>

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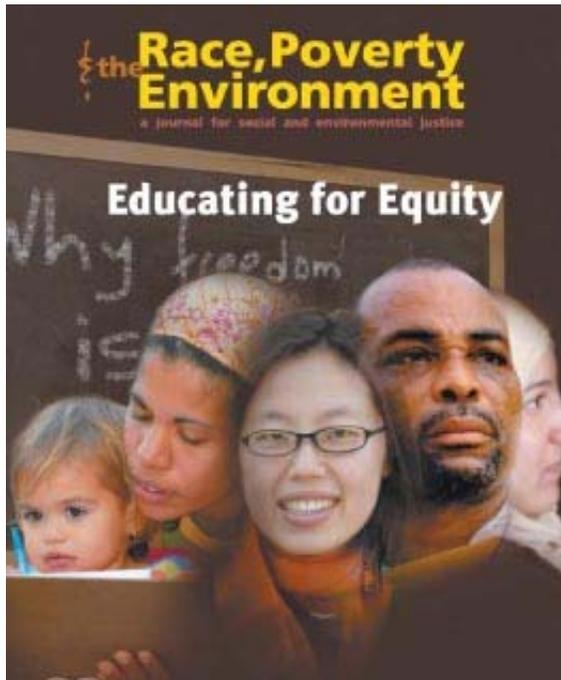
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