Preserving Affordable Transit-Oriented Housing

By Michael Bodaken and Todd Nedwick

As the U.S. economy slows, the likelihood of significant federal or local investment in new mass transit diminishes. But low- and moderate-income families depend upon housing close to transit to reduce their commuting expenses and improve access to jobs, schools, and other opportunities. Not surprisingly, the rental market has already begun to grow tighter in communities near existing transit and will most likely lead to escalating property values, making it more difficult to ensure long-term housing affordability.

Thousands of privately owned affordable apartments—both HUD-subsidized and unsubsidized—located near transit are at risk as property values rise. A 2009 AARP report co-authored by the National Housing Trust (nhtinc.org) and Reconnecting America (reconnectingamerica.org) claims that there currently exist over 250,000 privately-owned, HUD-subsidized apartments within walking distance of quality transit. However, over 150,000 of them are covered by federal housing contracts that will expire in 2014, which raises the possibility of their being converted to market rate housing as transit-oriented housing values rise.

These HUD-subsidized apartments house a very vulnerable population: The average annual income is less than $12,000; approximately 66 percent of residents are elderly or disabled; and most are people of color. In fact, low-income and people of color are about four times more likely to rely on public transit to get to work than middle class whites. Consequently, preserving transit-oriented housing is critical to maintaining access to jobs and resources for these disadvantaged populations.

In an environment where resources are scant, preservation becomes a critical priority, as well as an attractive option. Preserving an existing home is significantly less expensive than constructing new affordable housing. Rehabilitating an existing affordable apartment can cost one-third less than building a new apartment and in more expensive communities with high land costs, preservation can cost half as much as building new affordable housing.

Ironically, the economic downturn provides an excellent opportunity to safeguard affordable housing near transit—if we act before property prices appreciate.

Notable Preservation Strategies

In September, 2010, the National Housing Trust, Enterprise Community Partners (enterprisecommunity.com), and Reconnecting America published a report—Preserving Affordable Housing near Transit: Case Studies from Atlanta, Denver, Seattle and Washington, D.C.—which demonstrates how nonprofit developers in these metro areas have engaged in creative strategies to preserve and improve affordable rental housing near transit in spite of the challenges presented by the economic downturn. Featured preservation strategies include:

Act quickly to acquire buildings close to planned transit prior to price appreciation. NEWSED Community Development Corporation (CDC) faced this challenge when it sought to preserve Jody Apartments, located adjacent to the Sheridan Light Rail Station in Denver, Colorado. NEWSED (newsed.org) purchased the unsubsidized but affordable rental property in 2007, six years before the scheduled opening of the station. Early access to flexible acquisition assistance from Enterprise and a land lease from the Urban Land Conservancy were critical to making the purchase feasible. Although NEWSED immediately made improve-
ments to address life and safety issues, they were unable to obtain financing to make substantial physical improvements and secure long-term affordability within the same time frame. The seven-year loan term from Enterprise allowed NEWSED sufficient time to assemble the financing needed for a complete property redevelopment.

**Use data to identify and target at-risk, affordable properties near transit.** Successful preservation often begins with good data that can be used to identify and prioritize HUD-assisted, Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), and unsubsidized rental properties near existing and planned transit. The Mt. Baker Housing Association in Seattle, Washington (mtbakerhousing.org), is using a data-driven approach to carefully target and preserve unsubsidized rental properties for long-term affordable use along Seattle’s southeast transit corridor.

Although the southeast corridor’s new light rail line opened in 2009, the economic downturn has minimized widespread investment in the area, giving nonprofits an opportunity to acquire rental housing before speculation occurs. Since accessing public subsidies to redevelop such projects can be a challenge, Mt. Baker has chosen to purchase properties that do not need significant rehabilitation. To identify cost-effective preservation targets, Mt. Baker reviewed data on approximately 350 buildings in the transit corridor looking at factors, such as the property’s age and construction type—to weed out properties that may have been poorly constructed or were in bad condition or simply not good candidates for preservation. This approach allows Mt. Baker to stretch its limited resources much further in securing affordable housing before speculation picks up.

**Renters near D.C. Metro Live Better for Less**

Approximately 55,000 renter households in D.C. live in apartments located within half-a-mile of a metro rail station and over two-thirds of these apartments are unsubsidized. Many are located in neighborhoods that have experienced dramatic increases in median household incomes from 1999 to 2009. These households have significant lower housing and transportation costs than their counterparts in auto-dependent neighborhoods. According to data from the Center for Neighborhood Technology (cnt.org), combined housing and transportation costs in D.C. neighborhoods are less than 45 percent of area median income (AMI), as compared to over 55 percent of AMI in the region’s outlying suburbs.

**Access public resources targeted toward providing affordable housing near transit.** States and localities are increasingly prioritizing public resources for affordable housing near transit. At present, 32 states provide an incentive for proximity to transit, usually by awarding points in their LIHTC competitive scoring process. In Missouri, Mississippi, Oregon, Texas, and Utah, properties near transit can benefit from a 30 percent “basis boost” in LIHTC, thereby improving project viability.

**Tap zoning incentives to lower capital cost of affordable units near transit.** Capitol Hill Housing (capitolhillhousing.org) preserved Brewster Apart-

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ments—conveniently located just blocks from Seattle’s streetcar line—by tapping into resources created by the city’s innovative Transferable Development Rights (TDR) program. The TDR allows commercial real estate developers seeking to construct buildings in excess of allowable density to purchase unused density from affordable housing owners, providing them an opportunity to benefit while increasing building density near transit.

Capitol Hill Housing agreed to sell Brewster Apartments’ unused development rights to Vulcan, Inc., which plans to construct three office buildings taller than allowable heights for the neighborhood. The exchange provided $648,000 to Capitol Hill Housing, which was used to pay off Brewster’s underlying debt and improve the property’s replacement reserve accounts, making it sufficiently capitalized to continue serving as affordable housing for the next 50 years.

Create acquisition funding sources. Flexible financing to acquire and hold properties near existing and proposed transit until permanent financing can be assembled is critical to preservation. The National Housing Trust and Enterprise are working to fill this gap in Washington, D.C., through the Green Preservation of Affordable Transit-Oriented Housing (GreenPATH) initiative. GreenPATH is an acquisition loan fund specifically for existing subsidized and unsubsidized multifamily buildings that serve low- to moderate-income families within half-a-mile of rail stations in the D.C. metropolitan area.

Planned transit investments in Maryland and Virginia promise to bring improved transportation services to D.C.’s suburbs, but also raise the challenge of preserving affordable rental housing if neighborhood redevelopment occurs. In Montgomery County, Maryland, more than 26,000 apartments are located near existing or proposed rail stations and according to the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, nearly 50 percent of multifamily rentals along three redevelopment corridors in northern Virginia’s inner suburbs are currently affordable to households with incomes below 80 percent of area median income (AMI). NHT and Enterprise intend to raise about $54 million to preserve 1,000 affordable apartments through the GreenPATH loan fund. Potential sources of capital include banks, foundations, insurance companies, local government, and contributions from NHT and Enterprise.

Assembling the right mix of capital to provide preservation-oriented purchasers a low enough interest rate to maintain rents at affordable levels is critical to the success of the fund. Also critical are loan terms, which must grant buyers sufficient time to assemble permanent preservation financing, especially in light of limited public subsidies and the challenge of securing private financing.

All of these preservation strategies should be put in place during an economic downturn, so that when properties begin to appreciate, we can ensure that families of all incomes enjoy the many benefits of living near public transit.

References

- Preserving Affordable Housing near Transit: Case Studies from Atlanta, Denver, Seattle and Washington, D.C. <nhtinc.org/downloads/preserving_affordable_housing_near_transit_exec_summary.pdf>

Michael Bodaken is president and Todd Nedwick is assistant director of public policy at the National Housing Trust.

This article is adapted from one published at Shelterforce.org.
New Housing near Highways Threatens Community Health

By Catalina Garzón

The landscape at 14th and Wood streets in West Oakland has quite a story to tell about reclaiming a community’s future from industrial pollution.

Fourteenth Street, which runs through the downtown office district, ends at the sound wall bordering one of the busiest interchanges in the San Francisco Bay Area. Nearby, a historic train station that community activists fought to preserve from profit-driven redevelopment shows telltale signs of neglect: litter, broken windows, overgrown grass. The panoramic view of diesel trucks on the freeway framed by large gantry cranes at the Port of Oakland contrasts sharply with the new market-rate housing development next door.

The developer’s website offers a provocative vision for this newly rebranded area: “Once the end of the line for transcontinental rail passengers, Central Station will soon become a new kind of urban community: diverse, stimulating, and welcoming.” But environmental justice activists have a cautionary tale about the politics of infill redevelopment and smart growth that are ushering this neighborhood into a new era.

In a converted trucking facility across the street from the new housing development on 14th and Wood, a small but mighty community-based organization goes toe-to-toe with developers in the fight for the future of West Oakland.

History, Smart Growth, and Health

Margaret Gordon, cofounder of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (EIP), has long been a key community voice in redevelopment planning for the properties outside her office window. “The community has been through two different planning processes with the City around the train station development, and now we are on our third process,” she says. “Now the people in that new development next to it have different ideas. All these new residents see is an abandoned building... they don’t know about the baggage wing in that train station where the Pullman Porters did all their organizing because that was the only place that African-Americans were allowed to do so. We had to fight the City to not allow developers to tear it down and to put local hiring in place to make sure that residents will benefit.”

The struggle over West Oakland’s fabric connects the fate of historic buildings like Central Station to the diesel trains and trucks servicing the Port of Oakland through a network of rail lines, freeways, and truck routes. To groups like EIP, the situation at 14th and Wood streets is also a textbook example of land-use conflicts that smarter growth should be helping communities to avoid.

Smart growth proponents argue that building more housing near public transportation is a smart way to reduce air pollution. But what if it places more people next to sources of toxic pollution like diesel truck traffic? Not such a smart idea, as residents already living next to freeways and port facilities can attest. Diesel truck and train traffic has been shown to reduce lung function in children, increase the risk of developing cancer and asthma, and affect school performance and sleep patterns. According to the California Air Resources Board, diesel pollution costs the state at least $19.5 billion per year in the form of missed school days, missed work days, and health care costs.
Warning: SB 375 May Be Hazardous to Health

Recent smart growth efforts in California hold peril as well as promise from an environmental justice standpoint. State legislation (SB 375) to lower commuter car emissions that contribute to climate change requires each region to realign its housing, land-use, and transportation investment priorities to encourage more compact development along existing transportation corridors. But it does not require regions to account for emissions from diesel trucks and trains, which may expose more residents to toxic air pollutants like diesel particulate matter. (See Figure 2, page 80.)

Much of the Bay Area’s mass transit infrastructure—such as the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rail system—runs parallel to major freight corridors with heavy diesel traffic. Consequently, transit-oriented housing is being planned around light rail stations next to freeways, warehouse districts, and designated truck routes. What’s more, bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly developments are being proposed for the streets in these areas with their heavy volumes of truck traffic and truck-attracting businesses.

Like canaries in a coal mine, some Bay Area environmental health advocates are warning that planners may be heading towards a collision between smart growth and environmental justice. For over eight years, the Ditching Dirty Diesel Collaborative has been supporting EIP and other community groups in their efforts to reduce exposure to diesel pollution in the hardest hit neighborhoods. More recently, the coalition has focused its efforts on changing the unhealthy land-use patterns that attract diesel trucks and trains into residential areas.

A 2011 report by the Diesel Collaborative and the Pacific Institute indicates that potential land-use conflicts may be averted if regional SB 375 implementation efforts start taking into account the health risks posed by freight transport corridors. The report found that nearly half (42 percent) the land being prioritized for development in the Bay Area is located in communities with the highest health risk from toxic air contaminants as designated by the region’s Air District. It also found that three-fourths of the land in Priority Development Areas is far enough away from freight transport hazards to be more suitable for sensitive uses like new housing. (See Figure 1.)

“Freight transport is a major source of unhealthy pollution that disproportionately affects low-income and communities of color in our region,” says Gordon, a founding member of the Diesel Collaborative and co-author of the report. “This new study shows that healthier places for new housing, schools, parks, and other sensitive land uses can be found in these communities. All planners have to do is to consider where diesel pollution sources are in deciding where more housing should be built.”

Uphill for Advocates and Opponents Alike

Ignoring the health impacts of a smart growth strategy that puts more people next to sources of toxic pollution has already proven a tough road for regional decision-makers. Last September, the Attorney General’s office issued a comment letter on the draft Environmental Impact Report for the SB 375 implementation plan put forth by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG). It states that “SANDAG has failed adequately to address impacts to public health and communities already burdened with pollution” and that environmental review should “consider feasible mitigation for localized air quality impacts” resulting from the plan’s implementation.

Advocates and planners alike face an uphill battle in carrying out the due diligence outlined in the
Attorney General’s letter to SANDAG. Environmental review processes are time-intensive and costly for developers, who are spearheading efforts to streamline the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) guidelines in order to fast-track infill projects aligned with smart growth priorities.

In January 2012, the Alameda County Superior Court issued a preliminary finding in a lawsuit brought against the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) by the California Building Industry Association (CBIA), upholding their claim that BAAQMD should be required to conduct an environmental review of its more stringent proposed new CEQA guidelines. Not satisfied with the outcome, the CBIA is now arguing that only the impacts of a proposed project on the environment should be considered—not the impacts of environmental conditions like toxic air contaminants on a proposed project or the people directly affected by it.

**Freeway Oriented Development Health Risks**

Environmental review rollbacks threaten community advocates who have long fought to expand due diligence to include the health impacts of additional diesel truck and traffic that proposed developments could attract into residential neighborhoods. “There’s nothing but sleight-of-hand around the transportation impacts of the former Oakland Army Base redevelopment next to the Port of Oakland,” says Brian Beveridge, co-director of EIP. “Where the trucks will be re-routed to, I don’t know. We’ve gone from a casino to a logistics center to a theme park to big box retail to the current plan at the Army Base, and we’ve been told that this doesn’t change the impacts that should be considered because the project’s design can’t mitigate for transportation impacts. It’s been a complete agency-to-agency brush-off.”

While the battle over environmental review continues in the courts, residents living in freight-impacted communities are fighting to keep development decisions accountable on the ground, despite getting the runaround.

“All the battle over environmental review continues in the courts, residents living in freight-impacted communities are fighting to keep development decisions accountable on the ground, despite getting the runaround.

“Everything at the city has been in such disarray,” says Gordon. “With redevelopment going away and budgets being cut, it’s definitely a life-and-death situation. Instead of being at the table, you’re going to be on the menu unless you fight to justify these changes. You’ve got to have hundreds of people at city council committee meetings or threats of real lawsuits to get anything to change. On top of that, you have to have capacity to be able to go from local to county, regional, state, and federal levels, and to organize the agencies at the same time. It’s a constant juggling act.”

**Community Organizations Step Up Their Proposals**

Ensuring that current residents benefit from efforts to clean up toxic pollution, eliminate blight and attract economic reinvestment into an environmental justice community is no easy task. So far, long-time residents who have borne the brunt of industrial operations in...
their neighborhoods have reaped relatively few of the benefits of cleanup and redevelopment that are paving the way for gentrification. One key benefit—the increase in tax revenues from redevelopment—which was supposed to resource community-supported projects, such as West Oakland’s Central Station redevelopment, is now in limbo because of a statewide overhaul by Governor and former Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown. 

Low-income residents of the Bay Area—a region with some of the highest costs of living in the nation—have had few housing choices besides those made affordable by their proximity to freeways, ports, industrial facilities, and other polluting areas. If affordable housing continues to be sited next to sources of toxic pollution, a closer look at current environmental and health conditions in impacted communities reveals what could be in store for coming generations—West Oakland has one of the highest asthma hospitalization rates in the region.

“If we want to create healthy and safe communities, we need to hold public agencies accountable [for] policies to make sure that happens,” says Azibuike Akaba, a Diesel Collaborative member with the Regional Asthma Management and Prevention Program.

The Diesel Collaborative has proposed a number of solutions to regional agencies, including prioritizing land located beyond a health-protective buffer zone from freight-related land for sensitive uses like housing. The land located within the buffer zones itself can be prioritized for commercial and light industrial development. Redevelopment of the former Oakland Army Base next to the Port of Oakland, for instance, could incorporate a logistics center for truck-attracting businesses to green their operations and relocate them from residential areas in West Oakland. Where the only available land for new housing is located close to freight-related uses, developers should be required to incorporate mitigation measures in the design, such as indoor air filtration and monitoring systems, to reduce potential health impacts.

Health-conscious planning is a critical step towards assuring that community benefits for current and future residents are fully integrated into and result from proposed redevelopment plans and projects. We can either address public health in planning for regional growth, or pay later in the form of serious illness, lowered productivity, and soaring health care costs. To advance environmental justice, a smarter growth strategy must address up front the potential conflicts between existing polluting land uses and proposed housing developments.

Endnotes
1. Central Station Development: <welcomeaboard.com/>

Catalina Garzón co-directs the Community Strategies for Sustainability and Justice program at the Pacific Institute in Oakland, California.
Sailing to Local Hire in San Francisco

By Joshua Arce

In late 2010, San Francisco was abuzz with the prospect of being selected to host the 2013 America’s Cup sailing race. Like other cities seeking to emerge from the current recession, San Francisco has been eager to attract business and economic investments. Moreover, local billionaire Larry Ellison’s team had won the previous race, giving him the right to select the location for the next one. But San Francisco’s America’s Cup experience has been emblematic of the fact that equitable distribution of economic benefits is not automatic. It is up to community advocates to push policies that ensure equity.

As is typical with any “public-private partnership project,” jobs were at the center of the America’s Cup discussion. Supporters projected a $1.2 billion infusion of cash into the local economy that would create more than 8,000 jobs. Meanwhile, community advocates had spent the summer and fall of 2010, working with Supervisor John Avalos and building trade unions to develop a landmark mandatory local hiring policy.

Community advocates and policy makers suggested that America’s Cup job guarantees for local communities would help align the event with economic expectations of inclusion and expand interest in it beyond traditional yachting enthusiasts. In a Host and Venue Agreement signed on December 14, 2010, the Oracle-led America’s Cup Event Authority LLC voluntarily agreed to comply with San Francisco’s recently approved local hiring policy on $55 million worth of construction required to prepare the city’s waterfront. In return, the Event Authority received long-term rights to develop this waterfront property after the event. The Agreement was signed by Mayor Gavin Newsom and unanimously approved by the Board of Supervisors.

The following summer, however, when the local hiring coalition entered into discussions with event organizers about a strategy for non-construction jobs, such as vending

Jobs Policy Brings Promise for Rhode Island Jobs

Community and labor leaders around the country are coming together to work with cities to increase local employment opportunities on taxpayer-funded investments. Last week, the Providence City Council approved revisions to its local hiring policy—crafted by community groups, such as Direct Access for Rights and Equality (DARE) and the Rhode Island Building and Construction Trades Council, the training organization Building Futures, and high-road job advocates Build Rhode Island. Co-sponsored by Mayor Angel Taveras, this important initiative comes at a time when the city’s unemployment rate is over 13 percent.

Although happy about the policy, DARE Executive Director Fred Ordoñez acknowledges that based on past experience, the bigger challenge is in the implementation and enforcement. “We are hopeful that with a new administration, local allies, and allies around the country like Brightline, we will be able to hold officials and businesses accountable to hiring those who need employment the most,” he says.

Rhode Island Building Trades Council Secretary and Treasurer Scott Duhamel, who is also the treasurer of Rhode Island Jobs with Justice, notes that the policy is a direct result of a stringent but collaborative dialogue among community, labor, and city administration. “If enforced, this will truly be a policy that helps enact substantive positive change,” he says. —JA
Revive Oakland Wins Jobs Policy on Army Base Conversion

On February 7, 2012, the Oakland City Council unanimously approved a good jobs and community benefits framework that will guide the redevelopment of the massive Oakland Army Base project.

The Council’s vote followed a well-attended public hearing featuring a powerful line-up of advocates, workers, youth, and neighbors and was a major step towards victory for the Revive Oakland coalition. Convened by EBASE, Revive Oakland has been waging a multiyear campaign for a comprehensive job creation policy through local hire, with the goal of lifting communities impacted by the redevelopment. Next, community groups, labor unions, the city, and developers will negotiate a detailed Community Jobs Agreement and Project Labor Agreement.

Coalition-Endorsed Framework Guides Negotiations

A diverse coalition of stakeholders convened by Oakland Councilmember Jane Brunner developed consensus around a community benefits framework that will guide the negotiations in this groundbreaking opportunity to leverage public dollars to create skilled jobs for those often stuck in temporary low-wage jobs.

A staggering 80 percent of Oakland voters want the project to ensure workers’ rights to organize and to provide opportunities for previously incarcerated individuals, according to Jessamyn Sabbag of Oakland Rising.

“We are hopeful that we will reach agreements that deliver on the long-held promise of good jobs—for those often locked out of the economy—from this major redevelopment of publicly-owned land,” said Kate O’Hara, Revive Oakland’s campaign director.

Ambitious Goals Promise New Opportunity

The policy framework lays out a 50 percent local hire goal for construction and long-term warehouse operations jobs and calls for a share of the work each year to be set aside for new apprentices who have to be from Oakland. The local hire goal, which begins with West Oakland and extends to other low-income neighborhoods, marks the first time that Oakland has set local hire expectations for jobs beyond the construction phase.

The framework also includes the development of a West Oakland Jobs Center—ensuring long-term job pathways and training programs—and expects operations employers to pay living wages and hire workers directly, not through temporary staffing agencies, which can reduce job quality and stability.

Visit workingeastbay.org/reviveoakland for more information about EBASE and Revive Oakland.

and on-site recycling, they realized that not only did the Event Authority’s draft workforce plan seek to introduce a “good faith” element to soften the mandatory local hiring policy, it showed a lack of commitment to engaging an all-union workforce on permanent and temporary construction, such as event staging and spectator seating.

Local hiring success in San Francisco has always depended upon a unique partnership between community advocates and progressive building trade unions—a powerful alliance that was reignited by the America’s Cup workforce plan. Last September, Supervisor Avalos called a hearing to highlight the need to apply local hiring and prevailing wage protections to the America’s Cup jobs plan and the need to ensure that the wages and benefits secured by organized labor are not undermined.

Fundamental to this discussion is the idea that cities are not made to compete against one another for business. So, local hiring advocates maintained a dialog with community and labor leaders in Rhode Island, a potential alternative host site, to ensure solidarity with respect to prevailing wage and local hiring commitments. (See sidebar “Jobs Policy Brings Promise for Rhode Island Jobs.”) Any willingness to depart from these important safeguards to attract business only leads to a race to the bottom, especially for blue collar workers.

The jobs discussion came to a head at a City Hall hearing in January 2012, when dozens of community advocates, labor leaders and workers delivered a consistent message about the importance of embracing the city’s local hiring and prevailing wage protections for all work associated with the event and long-term development of the waterfront.

On February 27, Mayor Ed Lee and event organizers announced that the long-term development aspect was to be replaced by a scaled-back city-funded investment in shoring up San Francisco’s piers—to shift the focus of the discussion back to excitement around the race and the projected participation of hundreds of thousands of spectators.

However, community pressure and the support of key elected officials has ensured that local hiring and prevailing wages will apply to all aspects of America’s

Photos:

(Left) April 2011, protest at City Council.
©2011 Marilyn Betchtel/People’s World

(Right) Rose Morton testifies in support of jobs policy at the Council meeting.
©2012 EBASE
San Francisco’s Local Hire Works!

Prior to the December 2010 adoption of the local hiring legislation crafted by Supervisor Avalos and a coalition of community and labor advocates, only 20 percent of local residents got hired on taxpayer-funded construction on average. A year after the law went into effect on March 25, 2011, resident participation on the same projects has jumped to 34 percent—a 70 percent increase over previous “good faith” levels. In addition, the new policy has increased racial and gender diversity on public works projects.

Cup construction—from temporary bleachers and tents to the America’s Cup Village—and that apprentices will be drawn from state-certified joint apprenticeship programs. The Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the scaled-back proposal on March 27.

One key lesson of the America’s Cup experience is this: advancing job equity in an environment where cities compete to attract economic investment requires both strategic policy development and partnerships with key stakeholders. San Francisco benefitted from the hard work that led to the creation of a local hiring policy that covers public works construction, which private companies can opt to comply with. Even so, securing that commitment would not have been possible without support from the city’s progressive building trade unions and community advocates.

The Event Authority’s decision to quickly embrace job equity ensured the support of an important group of stakeholders for the modified proposal with little impact on the deal’s bottom line. And San Francisco advocates have been able to send a clear signal that the Bay Area is a place to do business and host high-profile events—without compromising the values of job equity and sustainable working conditions.

Preliminary data on 22 active public works projects that got underway in the latter part of 2011 shows that 34 percent of craft hours and 68 percent of apprentice hours have been performed by San Francisco residents. Women performed less than one percent of all the craft hours, with San Francisco women performing about 1.8 percent of all craft hours by residents. As most of these projects are still in progress, the data only indicates the preliminary impact of the policy, rather than definitive results.

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Photo: San Francisco Bay sailboat traffic.
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Joshua Arce is the executive director of Brightline Defense Project, a sustainable community advocacy organization.
Interview with Yeashan Banks
By Christine Joy Ferrer

Originally from Bayview-Hunters Point in San Francisco, Yeashan Banks, 22, is an organizer for the Bayview Hunters Point Organizing Project at People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER). For the last year or so, she’s also been advocating for free public transportation for youth. In 2010, Banks graduated from the Movement Activist Apprenticeship Program with the Center for Third World Organizing and has volunteered for Congresswoman Barbara Lee and the Black Organizing Project and served as a Youth Researcher for the California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities Initiative. She has also worked with Oakland’s Youth Uprising.

Christine Joy Ferrer: What motivates you to do the work that you do?
Yeashan Banks: POWER’s environmental justice project in [my neighborhood] is what first attracted me to the organization. The Bayview-Hunters Point toxic shipyard has been making folks in the neighborhood—specifically folks in my own family—sick for years. My grandfather worked at the shipyard and has asbestos-related lung problems.

Ferrer: What are some of the issues that young people face through lack of access to public transportation?
Banks: If you have a single parent, or even just a working class family in San Francisco, then you know it can be really hard for your parent(s) to give multiple children a $21 pass or $2 for every ride they take.

A woman I organized with told me that one time her children came back from the bus stop because the bus driver refused to let them on without fares. She lives on a fixed income in public housing and can’t afford to pay. I remember when I was younger and didn’t have the [35-cent fare], I could ask the driver for a courtesy ride. It wasn’t as big a deal.

Now youth are getting criminal charges for not having proof of payment. I’ve seen kids at the Third Street station jump off the platform to get away from MUNI police. They are running straight into traffic. Or you see them hide from police, or not give their real name and address. They shouldn’t feel scared to ride the bus to school. If the city is cutting down the number of school buses, especially in low-income neighborhoods of color, like Bayview-Hunters Point, and your parents can’t afford to get you back and forth from school, it shouldn’t cheat you out of an education. Already, all over the city, they’ve closed down different schools [because of] low attendance.

Ferrer: How is the lack of transit justice impacting young people in low-income and communities of color in Bayview-Hunters Point and other parts of San Francisco?
Banks: Right around the time we started this campaign [for free fast passes], a black male was shot in the back for not having his proof of payment. Kenneth Harding was riding the T-Train, which runs...
up from Sunnydale through Bayview to downtown. When he saw the officer, he ran. Shots were fired from both sides and he died. During routine fare checks, police are stricter and more belligerent in certain neighborhoods like Bayview and Mission, versus the Sunset. Transit racism happens in this city. More and more bus lines are getting cut in places like Potrero Hill, where public housing is located. When you talk to youth in low-income communities about organizing, they think, “But I need to work on getting a job right now.” Or maybe, their single mom is facing eviction from their home. They’d rather be investing their time into what they need at that moment. It’s a really long process to get a youth to understand the connection between what they’re going through and the system of oppression.

Ferrer: How does POWER organize youth and help them understand the connections between social, racial and economic equality?

Banks: We do a program at Balboa High School where we show youth that we’re organizing for free youth passes, but we also are educating them in movement history. After we win, these youth will feel empowered. [Then], they’ll want to further change things. It’s not just about free passes, it’s about connecting to different global struggles. You wonder, “Why am I fighting for youth free passes? I’m not a youth.” But it’s about getting people to start analyzing the system and thinking about why things are the way they are and what to do to change them.

Christine Joy Ferrer is the web and publishing assistant for RP&E and founder of eyesopenedblog.com.
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