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.

“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

![Relative Contribution of On-Road Mobile Sources to Overall Emissions, San Francisco Bay Area](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pollutant</th>
<th>Cars/Light Trucks</th>
<th>Med./Heavy Duty Trucks</th>
<th>Buses</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>GHG (2007)</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<td>34%</td>
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<td>41%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of Overall On-Road Emissions

Source: Bay Area Air Quality Management District

[Figure 2: Freight vehicles, which account for over one-third of the harmful particulate matter emissions in the Bay Area, are not included in California’s SB 375 climate legislation mandates. Courtesy of Community Strategies for Sustainability and Justice program.]
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.
Race, Poverty and the Environment (RP&E) is Urban Habitat’s national journal of social and environmental justice, founded in 1990.

For over two decades we have covered how low-income people and communities of color are organizing to win equality and justice. Multiracial, multi-issue organizations capable of uniting constituencies for social justice action have never been more critical. RP&E is a longtime and crucial connection point for advocacy groups, regionally and nationally.

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