

Creating Great Communities in the San Francisco Bay Area

By Jeff Hobson

Residents in the San Francisco Bay Area are suffering from stratospheric housing prices and problems brought on by years of sprawling development, such as all-day traffic gridlock and inaccessible jobs and services. But over the next five years, the San Francisco Bay Area will have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to stop poorly planned growth and reinvest in the existing communities. That is why the four leading Bay Area nonprofits that work on transportation, housing, social equity, and open space issues have launched the Great Communities Initiative—an unprecedented collaborative that brings together the necessary technical expertise, organizing depth, and community contacts communities need to relieve the housing crisis and improve their neighborhoods.

Displacement and Gentrification

Displacement is well underway in some of the San Francisco Bay Area's most vital ethnic neighborhoods, such as Bayview Hunters Point, the Fruitvale, West Oakland, and Richmond. Residents need an annual household income of over \$200,000 to afford the Bay Area's median home price of \$646,000. Three of the five least affordable U.S. cities for renters are San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose.¹

As costs spiral out of control, displacement is affecting a wide range of residents. Poor people of color are being hit the hardest, and it will only get worse if we do not change course. The Bay Area expects a surge of 1.7 million new people over the next 25 years and the region is not providing enough affordable new homes.²

Business-as-usual means "displacement" for poor people of color in the Bay Area. When families are pushed out, priced out, or kicked out, it tears at the fabric of the community, fuels more displacement, and weakens the schools, churches, and social networks that support residents through economic hardships.

At the same time, Bay Area residents fed up with sprawl are increasingly declaring natural areas and working farms off-limits to development. With this open space protection comes a responsibility to ensure that new homes are built in existing urban areas, especially in public transit corridors where it is possible to have homes and transportation that people can afford.

Neighborhoods within a half-mile radius of transit stations, known as "station areas," represent the Bay Area's best hope for safe, affordable homes in pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods rich with services. The proximity to transit and services allows families to invest in home equity, education, and other wealth-building activities, instead of spending on automobiles, which depreciate in value very quickly. This is why families in these areas qualify for larger Fannie Mae mortgages.

We have all heard about the handful of successful transit villages, such as the nationally acclaimed Fruitvale Transit Village in Oakland. But to maintain housing availability for people of all incomes and ethnicities, protect the environment, promote active living, and ensure regional transit access to jobs, education, and services, we need to drastically shift regional growth patterns so that such development is the norm rather than the exception.

Unfortunately, the obstacles to building such communities are significant. Outdated zoning codes prohibit traditional town centers with their mix of homes, shops, and businesses, and state fiscal policies compel cities to pursue sales tax revenues over affordable housing. Worse still, most decisions about where and how to grow do not involve community members in a meaningful way. So residents often oppose infill development, if they see it as being imposed on them without adequate community benefits. Community

organizations in low-income areas end up having to fight individual projects while larger forces cause a tide of displacement and erosion of community services.

Once-in-a-Generation Opportunity

Here in the Bay Area, we have an opportunity to find a better way. Since 2000, Bay Area voters have approved \$12 billion in new mass transit investments and the region will add 100 new stations to the existing 305 rapid transit stations. This expansion includes new subway, light rail, and rapid bus corridors in many of the region's lowest-income neighborhoods.

In addition, a new policy from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) requires community planning processes in new station areas. There is also more public and private funding for station area plans, in existing neighborhoods as well as where transit is expanding.

Changing demographics indicate that more Bay Area residents will be looking to live close to transit, and analysts expect a demand for an additional 550,000 homes near transit by 2025.³

Infill development around station areas is also more financially viable than before. With developers willing to invest millions in planning, there are more opportunities to demand that they reinvest their profits in the community, through amenities such as libraries, parks, schools, child-care centers, and other essential services.

But we will only secure those improvements if we organize together.

The Great Communities Initiative

Spearheaded by the Transportation and Land Use Coalition, Urban Habitat, Greenbelt Alliance, and

the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, the primary goal of the Great Communities Initiative (GCI) is to ensure that half of all new homes built by 2030 are in pedestrian-friendly communities close to mass transit, at prices affordable to people of all income levels.

GCI's anchor partners will work with community groups to ensure that development plans preserve local assets and identify and fund needed services and amenities, such as parks, childcare centers, and libraries, while also supporting appropriate local economic development. We will also work with local advocates and decision-makers to involve key stakeholders in planning processes; provide education about best practices; analyze the strengths and weaknesses of draft plans; help develop effective media strategies; and overall, strive to make sure that exemplary plans gain widespread support.

Activating Communities: Together, We Can Do It

Whether our passion is social equity, open space protection, affordable housing, or sustainable transportation, we must work together to ensure that new development furthers all of these goals. Only through such a combination of ideas and passions can we hope to make urban areas valued parts of a sustainable region.

If we reinvest in our existing communities, many of which have been ignored for too long, we can redirect growth away from natural areas and working farms. We can build homes that provide enough choices for all residents, at every income level, to find great communities to live in. By focusing our efforts on transit station areas and building on the strengths of the diverse communities we already have, we can improve the quality of life for existing residents and make room for more. ■

1 DataQuick News, September 2005 median home price. National Housing Conference 2005 Paycheck to Paycheck Study for rental affordability and methodology for income needed to afford median home.

2 Association of Bay Area Governments, Projections 2005.

3 Reconnecting America's Center For Transit-Oriented Development, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Capturing the Demand for Housing Near Transit," September 2004.

More information about the Great Communities Initiative is available on the Web at: www.transcoalition.org/c/gci/gci_home.html.

& the Race, Poverty Environment

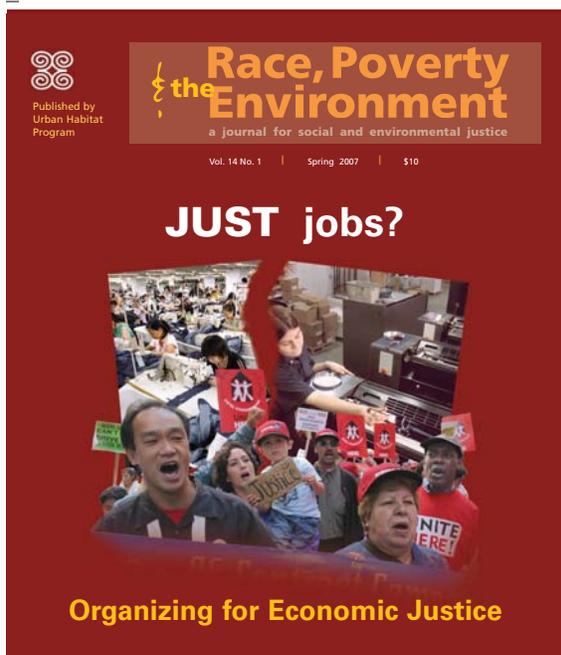
a journal for social and environmental justice



First published as a joint project of the Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, **RP&E** is now published twice annually by **Urban Habitat** and is dedicated to exploring the intersection of race, class, and environmental and social justice.

Don't miss any of our passionate, in-depth discussions of important social topics!

Support RP&E: subscribe today!



- Spring 1990 ▶ Earth Day
- Summer 1990 ▶ Cultural Diversity
- Winter 1991 ▶ Women of Color
- Spring 1991 ▶ Pesticides
- Summer 1991 ▶ Energy
- Winter 1992 ▶ The Summit
- Spring 1992 ▶ Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Summer 1992 ▶ Water
- Fall 1992 ▶ Native Nations in 1992
- Spring 1993 ▶ Urban Problems
- Summer 1993 ▶ Population and Immigration
- Fall 1993 ▶ Latinos and the Environment
- Spring 1994 ▶ Military Base Conversion
- Winter 1995 ▶ Environmental Justice and the Law
- Summer 1995 ▶ Nuclear Technology & Communities of Color
- Fall 1995 ▶ Social Justice and Transportation
- Spring 1996 ▶ Multicultural Environmental Education
- Fall 1996 ▶ The Border
- Winter 2000 ▶ A Place at the Table: Food & Environmental Justice
- Winter 2001 ▶ Reclaiming Land and Community: Brownfields & Environmental Justice
- Summer 2002 ▶ Fixin' to Stay: Anti-Displacement Policy Options & Community Response
- Summer 2003 ▶ Where Do We Go from Here? A Look at the Long Road to Environmental Justice
- Fall 2003 ▶ Governing from the Grassroots: EJ and Electoral Activism
- Summer 2004 ▶ Reclaiming our Resources: Imperialism and Environmental Justice
- Winter 2005 ▶ Burden of Proof: Using Research for Environmental Justice
- Winter 2006 ▶ Moving the Movement: Transportation Justice
- Summer 2006 ▶ Getting Ready for Change: Green Economics and Climate Justice

Use the form below or order online:
www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe

Yes! I want an annual subscription to Race, Poverty & the Environment.
Sent free of charge to grassroots groups upon request.

\$20 (Individuals) \$40 (Institutions)

Yes! I want to support the advancement of social, economic, and environmental justice in the Bay Area and beyond.

I want to support Urban Habitat with a tax-deductible donation of:

\$25 \$50 \$100 \$500 \$1,000 Other \$ _____

Name: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____ Email: _____

A check is enclosed Please charge my Visa/MasterCard

Visa/MC Number: _____ Exp. Date: _____

(Please include the 3-4 digit card verification number found on the back of most credit cards.)

Signature: _____

Please make checks payable to Urban Habitat. Mail this form to 436 14th St., #1205, Oakland, CA 94612