The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) provides water, sewage services, and municipal power to San Francisco and surrounding areas. It is also a huge job generator. When I joined the Commission in 2008, I identified three priorities: (i) achieving stronger local hire outcomes; (ii) adopting an environmental justice policy; and (iii) creating an agency-wide Community Benefits Program.

In 2002—following a bond measure approved by San Francisco voters that November—the SFPUC embarked on one of the largest water infrastructure projects at a cost of $4.6 billion dollars. The Water System Improvement Project (WSIP), which includes more than 80 projects, is working to repair, replace, and seismically upgrade deteriorating pipelines, tunnels, reservoirs, pump stations, storage tanks, and dams from San Francisco to the Central Valley by the end of 2015.

**WSIP Under a Local Hire Lens**

In 2008, the number of local residents being hired through WSIP fell far below the city’s goal of 50 percent. But pressure from San Francisco-based community organizations to increase the percentage of local hires—across all city agencies—has served as a catalyst and spurred a city-wide debate on how to move from showing “good faith” efforts in local hiring to requiring numerical results.

Supervisor John Avalos has introduced legislation that requires mandatory local hiring for city-funded projects. It comes at a time when the SF PUC is preparing to bring forward the $4 billion Sewer System Improvement Project for San Francisco. Unlike the WSIP, all of the work is to take place in San Francisco, which makes the issue of local hire all the more important.

Since many of the jobs on this project require skills, a key step is to increase the number of qualified residents available to fill the slots. So, the Commission has allocated over $1 million to City Build—San Francisco’s job training program—to scale up their training efforts targeted at unemployed and underemployed residents in districts, such as Bayview-Hunters Point and the Mission.

**Bringing EJ to Waste Water**

Historically, the SFPUC Waste Water Department has had an inconsistent relationship with Bayview-Hunters Point residents living adjacent to its sewer plant. It is the only waste water plant in San Francisco that is located across the street from people’s homes. Over the years there have been myriad complaints, including concerns about odors.

In October 2009, after working closely with the Environmental Justice (EJ) subcommittee of the Citizen’s Advisory Committee and the PUC staff, the Commission unanimously approved an EJ policy—the first of its kind for a utilities agency—which articulates the agency’s commitment to preventing and mitigating the disproportionate environmental impacts of its activities on communities. It also provides a tool for rate payers and residents to hold the agency accountable.

**A Community Benefits Wrap Up**

The discussion over ways to operationalize the EJ resolution resulted in the development of an agency-wide Community Benefits Program, which specifically identifies ways in which the SFPUC can support workforce development, community contractor inclusion, and environmental justice, and the promotion of sustainable practices, education, arts, and culture.

The development of the Community Benefits Program and the accompanying policy have opened up a robust dialogue about what it means to be a good neighbor among SFPUC staff, commissioners, and community members. They have also prompted the creation of an inventory of all PUC work that falls under the rubric of community benefits provision—a timely exercise that will help pilot the program for the upcoming Sewer System Improvement Project.

Although my tenure on the SFPUC only lasted two years, I was struck by the scale of impact one can have through the public sector. Applying social justice values within a policy forum is something more of us should be doing because it creates institutional change that can outlast any one commissioner or administrator and result in long-term benefits for communities.
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Moving the Movement
Environmental & Climate Justice
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