

# Lake Merritt-Chinatown:

## Building a Livable and Affordable Neighborhood:

By Tram Nguyen

**T**he Lake Merritt BART station is tantalizingly close to several of Oakland's busiest corridors—downtown, Chinatown, and Lake Merritt itself. Yet, the area surrounding the BART station is surprisingly low-key, characterized by quiet apartment buildings, several parking structures, some sparse foot traffic, and a small, usually deserted park where Asian seniors can be seen practicing tai-chi early in the morning. BART riders come and go but don't linger. This neighborhood, though, is slated to become a “transit-oriented development” in a few years—one of several throughout the Bay Area.

TODs, as they are called, are neighborhoods planned within a half-mile radius of a transit hub. The idea is to incorporate mixed-use development—housing, small businesses, and services—within walking and biking distance of a major transit stop. The reduced car traffic, coupled with the increased public transit ridership, makes the transit system more efficient overall.

### Transforming Transit

Last year, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) awarded 20 grants totaling \$7.6 million to Bay Area cities and counties to develop plans linking land use and transportation—a legacy, advocates say, of California's two recently enacted laws addressing the climate crisis. The laws, though still in the early stages of implementation, are being closely watched around the country as cutting edge approaches to reducing greenhouse gases through land use and transportation planning. AB32, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, establishes a statewide cap on greenhouse gas emissions by 2020. Its companion SB375, requires local planning organizations across the state to show that their land use policies result in carbon reduction.

TransForm, the statewide transportation policy advocacy coalition, has been deeply involved in the new transit projects with the goal of making sure that local communities usually left out of planning decisions—low-income workers and people of color—are

included in shaping the development process.

“We've got to get people involved early [because] there's a huge learning curve [before] the community [can] identify its needs and address them in the planning process,” says Joel Ramos, TransForm's community planner, adding that they hope “to grow this model [and] shift the whole paradigm of planning.”

### The Development Process

Typically, planning processes are set up to meet the needs of the developers and expedite the project, Ramos explains. That kind of inaccessibility, along with the specter of gentrification, makes the challenge of engaging local communities even more important. With the Lake Merritt BART Station Area project, local groups and advocates have begun organizing and participating at the front end of a two-year long planning process.

“We see an opportunity here to assert a strong vision and set of policies for how a transition to green communities can and must advance racial and economic justice,” says Mimi Ho, program director for the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). “We need to show how narrow green policies can be, and how they can lead to racial inequities and further polarization of wealth. We want to put forward a platform for green, healthy, and just communities that's grounded in the needs and hopes of our grassroots base.”

APEN is part of the Great Communities Collabo-

rative coordinated by TransForm to organize local stakeholders, identify community needs and concerns, and ensure democratic participation in the planning and decision-making. Local stakeholders for the Lake Merritt Station include Asian Health Services, the Buddhist Church of Oakland, the Oakland Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, Laney College, and BART.

For APEN, with more than 300 active members in the Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods, the development project is important on multiple levels. It is an opportunity to win concrete improve-

ments to residents' lives while establishing a model for city planning that creates green jobs, green affordable housing, and sustainable communities. It is also a test for building power with a broad coalition of diverse interests.

"The biggest challenge will be to get our voice across in the decision-making committee," says Wayne Leung, director of APEN's Power in Asians Organizing project, which organizes Chinatown. "APEN [occupies] only one of over 50 seats in the steering committee [and] even though we know what we want, it's really hard to get those ideas across."

Suburban communities have reaped the benefits born from the economic and environmental exploitation of poor communities. They still don't see how conserving the environment and driving less will benefit them economically.

The health and economic well-being of people living in polluted urban communities has been ignored for decades at the local, state, and federal levels. Cities like Pleasanton have long refused to comply with existing state requirements to zone for affordable housing.

People of color and poor people are not the ones who need to be convinced to drive less and embrace urban living. Although a growing number of low-income people of color are moving to the outer suburbs for cheaper housing, the majority already live in or near urban centers and are transit dependent. So, even if successful, SB375 could simply increase gentrification pressures rather than improve the quality of life in low-income communities of color.

Of course, communities planned with the priorities of keeping emissions low, driving less, and encouraging more walking provide opportunities for informal social interaction and greater relationships between neighbors. Incorporating more trees and other green infrastruc-

ture throughout communities can remove or trap lung-damaging dust, ash, pollen, and smoke from the air, while also providing shade and conserving energy. Inner city residents would love to see some of these benefits.

However, the bill lacks positive funding mechanisms and real restrictions on sprawl. We have a Governor who claims to be a champion of the environment, but will not support tax policies that raise the necessary funds to make SB375 a success. In the 2009 legislative session, he vetoed SB391, SB406, and AB338, all bills that would have strengthened SB375 or provided financing.

Finally, while SB375 encourages developments in urban centers near transit, it does not take into account the need to make improvements to urban schools, bring down the crime rate, or provide jobs. Creating complete, functioning communities cannot be done in silos, with education or employment being discussed separately from crime prevention, land-use, housing, and transit policy. Until real issues like racism and discrimination are addressed in the planning process, equity will remain out of reach. ■

*Kisasi Brooks was a field representative for former Assemblymember and now State Senator, Loni Hancock.*



## SB375 and Racism

By Kisasi Brooks

"White Flight" to the suburbs and redlining housing policies have shaped the way our communities are today. Until these issues of racism and discrimination are brought front and center, real solutions and equity will not be forthcoming. For decades, driving and development patterns favoring suburbanites have polluted poor communities and destroyed the environment.

While SB375 seems to make sense in theory, its implementation may fall short on long term equity due to unfunded mandates and unspoken racism. Getting the public to buy into the idea of living in compact urban developments rather than sprawling suburban subdivisions miles away from urban problems will not be an easy sell.



### Moving Forward

The planning process, begun in 2008, is now holding regular workshops and orientations for community members, including a series of “charrettes” where developers and stakeholders consult over design models and draft plans. At the end of the two-year process, a blueprint is expected to be submitted to the city council for approval.

Community groups have been busy trying to engage their bases—despite a wide range of interests and perspectives among stakeholder groups—to develop a consensus for the project’s vision and advocate for a real place at the decision-making table. Now coalition members have begun to realize that they need to come together to pull more weight with the city council and big institutions like BART and Peralta Community College.

“It’s been really important to develop a close relationship with the city staff who are implementing the project,” says Julia Liou, planning and development manager with Asian Health Services, “and also to agitate for an infrastructure by which the community can voice their concerns—not just through community meetings, but at the table [so that] decisions [made] address the needs of the stakeholders.”

In addition to its community clinic and health advocacy work, Asian Health Services also worked with local allies on the “Revive Chinatown” project, which resulted in streetscape improvements, such as four-way crosswalks laid out with elaborate red and gold designs. That history in the neighborhood has helped immeasurably when working on the Lake

Merritt project, Liou points out.

“There are always hot button issues, but at least we know we can dialogue—we can say, let’s try to figure it out,” she says.

### Community Priorities

Last year, stakeholder groups surveyed over 1000 community members to identify needs and priorities. The top three concerns were: public safety, jobs, and affordable housing, which have been incorporated in the general vision.

The redeveloped Lake Merritt BART community will have lots of open, as well as multi-use space to accommodate such diverse local residents as Asian seniors, Chinatown youth, and Laney students. It will have plenty of street lighting, less traffic congestion, and sidewalk improvements to enhance pedestrian safety. There will be green-built affordable housing with ground-level retailers and services that meet the needs of the community. The neighborhood, potentially a vibrant corridor to many of Oakland’s central destinations, will no longer be “the hole in the doughnut,” as Ramos puts it.

According to Leung, the project has energized APEN’s base-building, because “People feel like it’s a great opportunity to raise the community voice.” And, he adds: “It’s a good way to get them engaged in environmental justice and climate change issues in a real world context. They can see how EJ works and how they can be a part of it. Sometimes, when we talk about climate justice, it’s all the way up in the air. This is something we can pull down to the ground.” ■

Photo:

APEN members at a Bay Area protest for clean air, healthy jobs, and climate justice.

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



**Photos:** (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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