

Green Zones for Economic and Environmental Sustainability



California Environmental Justice Alliance

Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, Communities for a Better Environment, Environmental Health Coalition, People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights

The mission of the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) is to strengthen the progressive environmental justice movement in California by building on the local organizing efforts and advocacy successes of our member organizations to achieve state policy change. We focus on California's communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, Central Valley, the Los Angeles region, the Inland Valleys, and the San Diego/Tijuana border region. We are working to achieve environmental justice by organizing in low-income communities and communities of color - those most impacted by environmental hazards - and by pushing for policies at the federal, state, regional and local levels that protect public health. Together, we are building a movement for health and justice.

GREEN ZONES: THE VISION

The California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) is launching a new initiative to support community-based visions for environmental justice and sustainable, community-based development. The new effort, called “Green Zones,” utilizes a comprehensive approach to transforming communities overburdened with environmental hazards and lacking economic opportunity into healthy, thriving neighborhoods.

Green Zones are places that face a deadly combination of public health burdens, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic stressors, but are prioritized for resources and support at a variety of levels to implement community-based solutions to achieve change.

The Green Zones strategic approach combines a strong community grounding with tangible opportunities for change. Our initiative will identify “Green Zones” in neighborhoods or clusters of neighborhoods, which would then be able to access benefits at the state and federal levels. Benefits will focus on three areas of change:

- Reducing existing environmental pollution and improving land-use decisions
- Investing in sustainable, community-based development
- Increasing community capacity and power

Neighborhoods eligible for Green Zone designation will be identified through established cumulative impact screening tools, such as the Environmental Justice Screening Methodology, developed by Rachel Morello-Frosch of UC Berkeley, Jim Sadd of Occidental College, and Manuel Pastor of University of Southern California, or other tools developed by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Green Zones allows clearly identified low-income communities, immigrant and communities of color that have borne inequitable burdens of environmental degradation to become first in line for much-needed resources. It will provide multiple, coordinated opportunities to realize community visions for sustainability and economic opportunity and amplify the voice of residents in local decision-making. The Green Zones initiative will demonstrate the effectiveness of a place-based model of collaborate environmental justice policy-making that can achieve transformative results and serve as a model throughout the country.

WHY GREEN ZONES?

Communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities face disproportionate burdens of environmental pollution and related health risks in this country. This inequity is a result of many factors: a history of residential segregation and discriminatory zoning, lower levels of political and economic power, and market-driven land use and economic development patterns that exacerbate the concentration of environmental hazards in disadvantaged communities, while distributing

their benefits elsewhere. Combined with the absence of meaningful economic and political opportunities, low-income communities and communities of color face many barriers to health and sustainability.

Communities across the United States have challenged this pervasive and systematic environmental injustice by organizing to increase their voice in the political, economic, and land use decisions that impact their health and quality of life. However, these local success stories have not led to the comprehensive change needed in many communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities. The “piece-meal” approach of many efforts, focusing on one issue or geographic area, is not sufficient to overcome systemic barriers to healthy environments and local economic opportunities. Public and private initiatives aimed at community revitalization in areas plagued by chronic disinvestment and abandonment have often failed to use transparent and participatory decision-making mechanisms, resulting in negative consequences, such as local displacement.

It is time for a more holistic, and strategic, approach to neighborhood transformation. The Green Zones initiative moves towards an integrated, place-based, and collaborative framework to foster sustainable, thriving communities. It shifts away from fighting community health threats one-by-one to a more holistic approach based on principles of justice and sustainability, and grounded in community participation.





IMPLEMENTING GREEN ZONES

Implementing the Green Zones initiative consists of creating solution-oriented partnerships with community-based organizations involving many entities, from federal to local agencies. It will coordinate and leverage existing public programs to achieve positive change in low-income communities and communities of color through two, linked strategies: partnership with local organizations to utilize and distribute new resources generated, and coordination with federal agencies to create specific Green Zone opportunities.

Green Zones in different cities will be tailored to meet local needs. A collaborative of organizations working in each area will ensure Green Zone development reflects the solutions identified by residents during the visioning and planning process, and connect Green Zone benefits and resources to residents.

A federal working group comprised of CEJA members and appropriate agencies will create mechanisms to coordinate and leverage existing public programs in Green Zone areas. The working group will develop new benefits, such as additional scoring criteria in grant programs linked to Green Zones. It will foster collaboration between community groups and local, state and federal agencies. By better targeting existing resources and working together to create new benefits, we can demonstrate the effectiveness of deep, solution-oriented investments in communities that need it the most.

BENEFITS OF GREEN ZONES

Reducing existing environmental pollution and improving land-use decisions

Improvements in the health and quality of life of the most impacted communities is not possible without reducing the disproportionately

high environmental risks many low-income communities and communities of color face. Green Zones can draw regulatory focus to those communities that have long shouldered the costs of unsustainable economic activity and inequitable land-use planning. The Green Zones designation would be a first step to focusing environmental protection efforts, including enforcement, inspection and compliance, regulatory attention, and direct interventions to reduce pollution. It can also facilitate changes for a wide range of agencies that engage in land-use planning, such as local and regional planning boards. Green Zones could reduce pollution and improve land-use decisions by:

- Creating emission “caps” in designated areas.
- Targeting enforcement actions to ensure compliance of local operations.
- Coordinating local programs and resources to reduce exposure and pollution levels, e.g. weatherization programs, air filtration units,
- Community and specific plans can be developed and incorporated into General Plans that have strong community participation that contain clear plans for zoning changes, economic development, affordable housing, transportation and other neighborhood priorities.

Investing in sustainable, community-based development

CEJA supports a vision of the “Green Economy” that reduces the greenhouse gases produced from our overall energy economy, generates good jobs for low-income communities and communities of color, and is based on principles of equity and sustainability. Green Zones can support local, green development initiatives, such as renewable-energy and energy-efficiency projects, by increasing access within designated areas to public resources. Targeted public spending can have the additional benefit of stimulating private and philanthropic investment and forming new public-private partnerships. This can be achieved by:

- Increasing access to and leveraging billions of dollars distributed by federal programs to promote community and economic development in economically depressed areas.
- Encouraging small and minority owned business and cooperative



Sample listing of public programs that can support Green Zones

Department of Energy Weatherization Assistance Program and State Energy Program
Housing and Urban Development Community Service Block Grants and Neighborhood Stabilization Program
Sustainable Communities Partnership Interagency Collaborative
Department of Labor Green Jobs Innovation Fund
Department of Transportation Bus and Bus Facilities Discretionary Funds and Transportation Enhancement Program
Environmental Protection Agency Area-Wide Brownfields Planning Grants

development, workforce development and local hire programs and requirements in Green Zone communities.

Increasing community capacity and power

Each Green Zone would be grounded in an authentic, community-based planning and visioning process that will give residents an opportunity to articulate visions for their neighborhoods. This process will provide a clear platform for community-identified needs and resources, thus amplifying the voice of residents and providing a “road-map” for Green Zone development. Green Zones will utilize participatory, collaborative decision-making structures, which allow residents in designated communities to guide regulatory actions, funding priorities, and development, while simultaneously building community capacity.

All Green Zone efforts will foster community control of resources and projects. This can be accomplished through a range of innovative structures, from land trusts for affordable housing to the creation of locally-owned cooperatives. This will build long-term opportunities for community development and ensure that resources developed through the Green Zone process remain within designated communities.

CONCLUSION

Today, communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities face unprecedented economic and environmental challenges. At the same time, growing interest in and the acute need to transition to a more just and sustainable economic model offers an opportunity to revitalize neighborhoods that have been devastated by traditional, environmentally destructive economic activity and decades of disinvestment. On a policy level, there is growing federal agency support for a collaborative, place-based, problem-solving approach that targets those communities most in need.

The Green Zones initiative presents a new strategy to achieve healthy environments and thriving, local and sustainable development that all communities deserve. An integrated approach to community transformation that is needed in order to address the long-standing environmental justice issues communities face. Ultimately, Green Zones is not just an opportunity for communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities to become healthy, thriving neighborhoods. It is an opportunity for all of California and the country to begin implementing the just, sustainable policies that are needed to face our changing world.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This brochure is an excerpt from a longer Concept Paper, available at: www.caleja.org
To contact us, please email: greenzones@caleja.org

