



OPINION

New leadership for environmental justice in Inland Empire

By **PENNY NEWMAN** / Contributing writer

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The Inland Empire is home to countless dirty industries, smothered in the pollution of hundreds of diesel trucks that pass through every hour. It also home to many immigrants and working-class families who suffer every day from exposure to toxic chemicals in the air they breathe. A region overburdened with some of the dirtiest air in the nation deserves representatives who will fight to prioritize the health of their constituents with values of equity and justice.

The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice organizes residents living in heavily polluted areas of the Inland Empire to advance healthier neighborhoods. Last year, we proudly co-sponsored SB 1000 by state Sen. Connie Leyva, D-Chino, that will help advance environmental justice in land-use planning efforts. Now local governments must identify and meet the needs of their most vulnerable neighborhoods in citywide general plans. She also authored important bills to secure overtime pay for domestic workers and amend the penal code on sex crimes.

Sen. Leyva has demonstrated her unwavering commitment to social and environmental justice and we're proud to have her support on issues that impact low-income communities of color in the Inland Empire. This year, her bill SB 366 will expand solar projects built in environmental justice communities through the Green Tariff Shared Renewables program, which will reduce energy costs and increase access to renewable energy.

The California Environmental Justice Alliance's annual Environmental Justice Scorecard highlighted the leadership of Sen. Leyva for her consistently high score of 92 percent. The scorecard assesses how well California's elected officials supported actions to address environmental issues that impact low-income communities and communities of color. Assemblyman Jose Medina, D-Riverside, also received 92 percent and this year authored AB 890 that closes the loophole in citizen initiatives by making the California Environmental Quality Act apply to these initiatives.

However, despite overall progress in the Legislature, the scorecard also reveals there are still some business-backed Democrats who need to improve on environmental justice, one of them being former Assemblywoman Cheryl Brown, who scored a low 69 percent. It is very disappointing that many legislators who represent highly impacted districts have failed to be accountable to their constituents. We need them especially to take a stronger stand for our communities.

Last fall, our members pushed their families and neighbors to the polls to vote for new decision makers who would prioritize our health and we're proud to welcome two new representatives. Brown was replaced by a new champion for our community, Assemblywoman Eloise Gomez Reyes, D-San Bernardino, who joins Assemblywoman Sabrina Cervantes, D-Corona, as promising new legislators who will fight for environmental justice for the Inland Empire.

Recently, the California Energy Commission found that disadvantaged communities and low-income households often pay triple what higher income households pay for their utility services. Assemblywoman Gomez Reyes just introduced AB 523, the Equity in Clean Energy Investments Act, which will help close the green divide, help our families meet our energy needs, and save on our utility bills. It will ensure 25 percent of clean energy projects funded by the Electric Program Investment Charge program will benefit disadvantaged communities.

This year could also bring long overdue changes to the California Transportation Commission, which makes major decisions about transportation funding and projects that significantly impact the health of low-income communities and communities of color. AB 179, by

Assemblywoman Cervantes, will ensure that six voting members have expertise in public health, sustainable transit and environmental justice, and is in line with recent reforms that bring new environmental justice seats to the Air Resources Board and the Coastal Commission.

As the federal government stands to disinvest in our communities, our decision makers at the state and local level need to work harder to invest more deeply to protect us. With the leadership of Sen. Leyva and Assemblymembers Medina, Gomez Reyes and Cervantes, I am hopeful we will advance more critical policies this year that immigrant and working-class families in the Inland Empire urgently need to improve their health and quality of life.

Penny Newman is executive director of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, based in Jurupa Valley.