



PLANNING FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES: PUTTING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE INTO GENERAL PLANS

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California Environmental Justice Alliance and PlaceWorks

Imagine a state made up of healthy and thriving communities, where urban and rural neighborhoods have the means to prevent and reduce industrial pollution, provide open space and local organic food, develop affordable housing, preserve local culture, generate good jobs and conduct community-led planning to sustain this vibrant future.

This vision can now be a reality through SB 1000, “The Planning for Healthy Communities Act”, authored by California Senator Connie Leyva and co-sponsored by the California Environmental Justice Alliance and the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice in 2016. Under SB 1000, cities and counties are required to adopt an Environmental Justice (EJ) element, or integrate EJ-related policies, objectives, and goals throughout other elements of its General Plan. The bill also includes a process for communities to become meaningfully involved in the decision-making processes that govern the land use decisions in their neighborhoods.

Local jurisdictions will be required to comply with SB 1000 starting on January 1, 2018 upon a jurisdiction’s decision to update two or more elements of its General Plan. However, given the various benefits of incorporating environmental justice into General Plans, jurisdictions are also welcome and encouraged to voluntarily adopt an EJ element or integrated policies at any time.

Though SB 1000 is new legislation, its topics are not new in the field of planning. Air quality improvement has been an explicit goal at the federal level since since 1963 with the adoption of the Clean Air Act. Efforts to ensure safe and sanitary homes include the ban on lead-based paint in 1978 and the ban of asbestos in 1989. Planners and communities have been talking about food access and food security since the 1990s. Much groundwork to provide effective strategies for SB 1000’s mandates has been laid; what is required now is the integration of these strategies into the local planning process.

ADDRESSING HISTORICAL INEQUITIES IN PLANNING

Unfortunately, some cities have not prioritized environmental justice and social equity when engaging in land use planning. Some jurisdictions continue to maintain outdated land use plans that allow low-income communities and communities of color to become the dumping grounds for industrial toxic pollution. Yet when one community is made healthy and strong, the region as a whole becomes healthy and strong — and in turn, when one community is neglected, the entire region suffers and falls behind in the race to create a healthier future despite the growing threats of climate change and industrial pollution.

A history of poor and even discriminatory land use practices have put the majority of polluting industries in the backyards of the most disenfranchised local communities, right next to homes and schools. Consequently, low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to suffer from exposure to toxic chemicals, leading to higher rates of asthma, birth defects and cancers.

"South Fresno residents have a harsh reality. They breathe in toxic fumes everyday from neighboring industrial plants and diesel truck emissions. They lack basic infrastructure like sidewalks, street lights, and bike lanes making it dangerous to walk or bike anywhere. And they lack access to fresh foods making it very difficult to live a healthy lifestyle. By simply being intentional and thoughtful when planning for equitable land uses, low-income families and communities of color can get the opportunity for a better quality of life."

~Grecia Elenes, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability

Planning for EJ doesn't just redress past inequitable environmental impacts on disadvantaged communities. Updated goals and policies can also lead to significant positive health and economic outcomes for the community as a whole. Moreover, these new legislative requirements are consistent with principles of good planning and the obligation that planners have to ensure greater inclusion of all people in public decisionmaking and to seek equity and equality.

Planning for EJ is embedded in the AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct:

Principle 1e: We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence.

Principle 1f. We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.[iii].

Finally, taking time to thoroughly address current impacts on disadvantaged communities and develop preventative measures against future impacts can save a local jurisdiction from much work later on, especially as new EJ issues arise or controversial projects are proposed.

The state of California's continued environmental health crisis means that we can no longer afford to make land use decisions that can harm local residents and small businesses in our communities. Cities and counties must look towards comprehensive strategies in land use planning and community development that will improve public health, bring prosperity to the region, and will not displace current residents.

SUCCESSFUL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ELEMENTS

Prior to the passage of SB 1000, environmental justice elements and area plans have been successfully adopted by a handful of jurisdictions. These plans can serve as templates for other cities and counties that are at the beginning of their General Plan revision processes. Two examples of local agencies that have trail-blazed this new statewide legislation are the cities of National City and Jurupa Valley.

The City of National City's Health and EJ (HEJ) Element, adopted in 2011, was the first EJ element in the State. The City's creation of its new Element arose out of local concerns over the city's long history of poor zoning and land use planning. In National City, one can find autobody and car repair shops located on every other block, despite them being situated next to school zones and residential neighborhoods. Due to the large number of industrial uses and the Port of San Diego's National City terminal, approximately 32,000 pounds of toxic air contaminants are released each year in the city. Not surprisingly, asthma rates remain disproportionately high while available green space and affordable housing has been lacking.

Spurred by both city initiative and local community organizing efforts, National City's Westside Specific Plan, adopted in 2010, has created improvements in affordable housing, public transportation, safe pedestrian walkways, compatible land uses and increased clean energy. The plan was a springboard for citywide land use planning efforts, including the development of National City's Health and EJ Element. The City also adopted an amortization ordinance, which grants the City authority to discontinue incompatible land uses in areas with sensitive populations.

Like National City, the residents of Mira Loma Village located in Jurupa Valley have been boxed in by tall concrete walls and have been smothered by the pollution of more than 800 diesel trucks passing through the area every hour. Not surprisingly, the Inland Empire has some of the dirtiest air in the nation.

Today, Jurupa Valley residents can breathe a little easier thanks to the creation of their Environmental Justice Element. As part of a legal settlement in 2014, Jurupa Valley became the second city in California to adopt an EJ element in its citywide General Plan. The City has already installed high-performance air-filtration units in homes throughout the area and created vegetative barriers to absorb pollution. In addition, as part of Jurupa Valley's EJ element, the city is in the process of developing a restrictive truck route to prevent diesel trucks from passing in close proximity to homes. As a result of their equitable and innovative planning practices, the City of Jurupa Valley's EJ Element was awarded the American Planning Association California's 2015 Award of Merit for Advancing Diversity and Social Change.

A NEW TOOLKIT TO MAP A PATH FORWARD

Integrating environmental justice into General Plans allows local governments to make the best decisions that benefit their most vulnerable residents. It can also assist jurisdictions by addressing the intersectionality of multiple issues, demands and concerns, including, but not limited to: the need for housing, existing development and development patterns, environmental requirements, and more. SB 1000 can also promote important investments in disadvantaged communities, such as air filters, green buffer zones, improved water filtration systems and improved multi-modal transportation systems and networks.

To support the effective implementation of SB 1000, CEJA collaborated with California-based consulting firm PlaceWorks to co-write the SB 1000 Implementation Toolkit following the adoption of the bill. The Toolkit showcases a wide range of best practices, methods, strategies and policies for implementing SB 1000 that can be adapted to meet the needs of each unique community within California's diverse geography. This includes multiple methods for identifying disadvantaged communities using the most current tools and important strategies that allow jurisdictions to meet the requirements of the law. The Toolkit also offers principles and methods for facilitating successful community engagement plans, case studies that highlight model EJ planning practices in California, and potential funding sources to support SB 1000 implementation.

Improving land use is central to creating healthy and prosperous neighborhoods. Planning for environmental justice helps local jurisdictions by allowing the most effective and efficient projects and developments to be prioritized. This toolkit will ensure that local governments and community residents can work together to proactively plan for and address environmental justice concerns at the outset when developing the long-term goals, policies, and visions to guide the future growth of their cities. Our hope is that this toolkit will provide useful strategies to prevent the unhealthy mix of industry, homes, and residents, and promote policies that improve the health and well-being of our state's most vulnerable communities.

For more information on the SB 1000 Toolkit, please see visit www.caleja.org/sb1000-toolkit.

This article and toolkit were written collaboratively by [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#) and [PlaceWorks](#). CEJA is a statewide, community-led alliance that works to achieve environmental justice by advancing policy solutions. PlaceWorks is a nationally recognized California-based planning and design firm that provides comprehensive planning, urban design, landscape architecture, climate action planning, and environmental review services to support healthy communities.