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Readers Write: San Diego Legislators Lead the State on Environmental Justice

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San Diego, often celebrated as a green city, is home to neighborhoods overburdened with toxic pollution, disproportionately high rates of asthma, limited affordable housing, and a failing transit system. In October 2017, with the leadership of Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher, San Diego moved closer to rectifying these injustices.

I first experienced urban inequities and environmental injustice growing up in a low-income household in upstate New York. My hometown, Albany, is a historically disinvested city. The transportation of fracked oil exposes communities along its path to major risks of derailment, oil spills, and explosions. My single mother worked long hours to feed my brother and I. For years, we depended on donations of unhealthy food from church pantries. Back then, I did not have the language to describe that my city's food desert and crumbling infrastructure restricted our access to healthy food and an effective and affordable transportation. As I got older, I learned policy and organizing could change these circumstances.

Today I work as the Transportation Justice Policy Advocate at Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), where we organize low-income residents living in heavily polluted areas of San Diego and Tijuana to advance healthy neighborhoods. Many families have paid with their health. West National City and Barrio Logan, for example, rank in the top 10 percent of the most impacted census tracts for pollution in the entire state, in significant measure due to their proximity to freeways. Low-income communities of color in San Diego have suffered for years under a transportation agency that prioritizes freeways over an effective, affordable, and sustainable transportation system.

Last year, Assemblywoman Gonzalez Fletcher listened and worked with community leaders to create Assembly Bill 805, a bill that works to address these impacts through accountable and transparent leadership in our transportation agencies. EHC was proud to support and advocate for AB 805 and we celebrated when the Governor signed it into law.

AB 805 changes the voting structure to be more representative at the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) and North County Transit District (NCTD). These changes will increase accountability and transparent decision-making which brings us one step closer to transportation justice in the neighborhoods that need access to transit and safe places to walk and bike most.

Assemblywoman Gonzalez Fletcher's authentic engagement is what environmental justice communities need and expect from our decision makers. I was glad to see her recognized for her 83 percent score in the California Environmental Justice Alliance's fifth annual Environmental Justice Scorecard, the only one in the state to assess how well California's elected officials supported environmental issues that impact low-income communities and communities of color.

Gonzalez Fletcher was incredibly responsive to community needs, attended SANDAG meetings, and made sure to tap into the work already happening on the ground by bringing the stories of impacted residents to the center of the debate and staying in constant communication with community-based organizations like EHC. Thanks to her leadership, San Diego is one step closer to a transportation system with shorter commutes to jobs or grocery stores as well as reduced air pollution that will help address climate change and lead to less children with asthma.

Overall, San Diego legislators received the highest scores out of all major regions in California, with an 87% cumulative score among Democrats. Assemblymembers Todd Gloria and Shirley Weber each received high 92% scores, while Senators Toni Atkins and Ben Hueso each received a score of 86%. In particular, EHC has also worked closely with Senator Toni Atkins on critical environmental justice legislation like expanding solar for low-income communities and increasing investments for environmental justice projects. We congratulate and look forward to her tenure as the first lesbian and first woman Senate President pro Tem this Spring.

CEJA's scorecard also highlights some of the critical priorities for environmental justice in 2018. While bills like SB 2 by Senator Toni Atkins was an important step forward to create a permanent source of funding for affordable housing, we need to ensure low-income tenants have protections from rising housing costs, one of the driving forces displacing Californians across the state. There is much more work that needs to happen to undo years of bad planning and to move away from freeways and pollution. In 2018, it will be important that advocates for transportation justice and affordable housing work together on the local level and state level to not further disrupt or displace communities. Advancing environmental justice means not only making our neighborhoods cleaner, but also more livable for our families and communities.

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