



Planning for Environmental Justice

California Requires Planners to Protect Disadvantaged Citizens

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By Julianne Couch

Urban and regional planners customarily focus on developing land use plans and programs to accommodate growing communities, keeping in mind social, economic and environmental realities.

Now a law in California shaping how planning is carried out requires another element to be considered: Environmental justice.

Known as [SB 1000](#), this law offers a policy solution to guide community organizing and legislative processes to implement cutting edge programs. SB 1000 requires development plans to include "a safety element for the protection of the community from unreasonable risks associated with the effects of various geologic hazards, flooding, wildland and urban fires, and climate adaptation and resilience strategies," according to the legislation.

Three land planners working in California shared their experiences in a recent webinar titled "*Planning for Environmental Justice and Healthy Communities*," which was hosted by the Planning and the Black Community Division of the American Planning Association; the Planning Webcast Series Consortium; and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Environmental Justice.

Tiffany Eng is Green Zones program manager with the [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#), a statewide, community-led alliance that works to achieve environmental justice by advancing policy solutions. Carolina Martínez is associate director for policy at the [Environmental Health Coalition](#), which is dedicated to achieving environmental and social justice by empowering communities. And Michele Hasson is policy director with the [Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice](#), which works on social justice change through the lens of environmental health and justice. These three individuals described the ways SB 1000 is helping them advocate for members of disadvantaged communities (DACs) who might be impacted by development.

Eng explained that disadvantaged communities include low income residents, communities of color, indigenous and immigrant communities. In many cases, these communities are disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and other hazards that can lead to negative health effects, exposure, or environmental degradation. An important focus of SB 1000 is to "reduce the unique and compounded health risks" often found in disadvantaged communities, Eng said.

To address the environmental justice (EJ) element in SB 1000, and similar policies nationally, Eng said planners should focus on reducing pollution exposure and improving air quality, promoting safe and sanitary homes, encouraging development that promotes physical activity, and other actions. In order to bring about positive changes, she said, planners must "promote community engagement in the public decision-making process, and prioritize improvements and programs that address the needs of DACs."

Eng defined "intelligent planning" as something that "creates healthy and vibrant communities while preventing outcomes that can be costly to the community." Benefits of planning with an EJ element include avoiding lawsuits and conflicts, promoting equity and civil rights and leveraging funding and resources.

Eng's organization developed the SB 1000 Toolkit, which is a method to help planners identify EJ communities. She stressed that community engagement should not be an add on, after decisions have already been made. Rather, engagement should come first in the process. "The core of this law is community engagement. The spirit of the law is more environmental justice planning, not more burden," she said.

The planning process includes holding public meetings to help planners and others identify disadvantaged communities, then documenting existing conditions there. Involving and engaging the community is the first step to creating advisory committees, then developing EJ goals, policies and objectives to meet the needs of that community.

Eng said the SB 1000 Toolkit helps move planners and communities into increasing phases of community engagement. These include informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering. She said communities should choose the phases that best fit what they're trying to accomplish.

EJ goals, objectives and policies lead to solutions and ultimately, better outcomes. For example, Eng said some people are forced to travel regularly to find goods and services that aren't available in their neighborhoods. So, developing shopping centers within a neighborhood can reduce trips, and therefore, reduce pollution exposure. Food access can be made more affordable and nutritious through actions such as urban agriculture and local purchasing. Homes can be safer and more sanitary if unhealthy environmental conditions are addressed. Physical activity can be promoted with better access and urban greening. Community engagement can achieve capacity-building if it attends to cultural considerations, language access and broad and balanced participation.

Eng summed up best practices in EJ planning by quoting Grecia Elenes, a member of the [Leadership Council for Justice and Accountability](#). "South Fresno residents have a harsh reality. They breathe in toxic fumes every day from neighboring industrial plants and diesel truck emissions. They lack basic infrastructure like sidewalks, streetlights, 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."

Carolina Martinez of the Environmental Health Coalition has focused her EJ planning efforts around the city of San Diego. One tool used to identify disadvantaged neighborhoods is CalEnviroScreen 3.0. This is a software tool used to identify and direct resources to communities affected by pollution, based on environmental exposure and population data. Martinez said they use this and other tools to advance and educate policy makers in terms of urgency of needs her community faces.

For example, National City, which is in the southern part of the San Diego metropolitan area, has been "historically excluded from resources," Martinez said. She said land use there had been residential but in the 1970s more industrial uses arose. The city is a port of entry from San Diego Bay, and auto imports and other automotive related businesses have inserted into the area, particularly along Interstate 5. The result has been "heavy industrial use, disregarding the needs of the community," Martinez said. For example, it is common to see auto body shops adjacent to schools and homes. As a result, nearby residents suffer high asthma rates and other health complications.

"There is also the impact of cars taking over the public space along sidewalks, to the point that residents have to walk on streets," she said.

Predictably, in March 2014 a chemical explosion and fire at a body shop occurred that might have been much worse had it not happened on a Sunday. There were no workers present, Martinez said, but the hazardous materials presented problems for emergency responders and neighborhood residents.

According to Martinez, area residents were concerned about the impacts of these land uses but were not always able to present their concerns to planners or other decision-makers. Language barriers, lack of access, and simply not understanding the complex jargon of land planning kept people at a distance. "The planning world is a foreign world," she said, "with a language that is confusing for those who are not educated in that field."

To help bridge that gap, EHC launched the Salta Community Leadership Training Program in 2005. Its events featured accessible planning language, professional interpretation, childcare, food, cultural relevance, a safe space to gather, and a fun environment. It was intended to build self-awareness and confidence in participants and "forge genuine relationships that could lead to community building and real solutions," Martinez explained.

The group developed a community survey in which residents ranked their concerns. Land use compatibility was ranked high. The group operated with the guiding principal that land use is similar to how a home is organized. Most houses have a space for entertaining, a space for resting, a space for cooking, and that's how communities should be organized, she said. Instead, a zoning map of National City illustrated that "land use incompatibility is a big issue — you don't put a restroom inside a kitchen, but that's what land owners have been doing for many years in EJ communities. Most people want to keep their homes clean and safe, organized and comfortable," Martinez said.

Ultimately, in 2010 the Westside Specific Plan was approved, showing four priorities: restricting polluters to an industrial zone; creating affordable housing; restricting building heights to three floors, and maintaining a 500-foot buffer between the interstate highway and homes.

Martinez said this a good plan but "the language didn't have a lot of teeth." There were too many words like "may" and not enough words like "must." However, this process was what started the conversation that led to SB 1000. "If you plan for EJ with the community, you bring solutions leading to a different reality than the planning world might have thought of before," she said. "People facing the issues are articulating the solutions."

Michele Hasson, of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, focuses her work on the Inland Valley of Southern California. This area includes communities within western Riverside County and southwestern San Bernardino County and extends to cities in eastern Los Angeles County, in the Pomona Valley and the desert community of Palm Springs. The area has a variety of land uses.

Hasson said the area has numerous EJ health impacts due to "shortsighted land use planning" that come with astronomical costs. For example, during 2005-2007, unhealthy air cost \$193 million in hospital admissions and emergency room visits. Annual ozone-related public health costs could soon reach \$10 billion. But meeting federal clean air standards could result in significant public health saving, almost \$22 billion in the Inland Empire Region, Hasson explained.

"Healthy communities have to breathe," Hasson said. "The way we move around our communities impacts our air."

Hasson said that limited community engagement during the planning process has put the overwhelming majority of polluting practices in the most vulnerable communities in the region. "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," Hasson said.

There are many instances of the EJ element planning process helping communities to be meaningfully engaged in decision making about land use. Because of increased civic participation and engagement, cities can standardize and establish meaningful community development approaches. Hasson said of the common practice, "We put industry where it needed to go and people happened to live there." She said the increase in online purchasing has meant an enormous need for storing and moving goods. Now those goods move past homes by truck or rail. "Market driven land use planning put vulnerable people at risk."

Hasson described a community where homes were so close to industry that there was a high rate of cancer and asthma. In the community of Mira Loma Village, Hasson said, there were roughly 100 homes surrounded by warehouses and about 800 freights a day moved through the community. "People thought it was just the way it was" and they'd have to accept it, Hasson said. Then community engagement led to educating community leaders about the issue and giving people a path to work toward a shared goal. Now, the community has a restricted truck route and increased safety.

Hasson said a plan is a "living document" that can be referred to the next time development is happening in a given area. "This really helps residents engage with the planners and developers next time." Further, an EJ element helps a community understand what a planning process looks like and what to look out for.

"When they get a notice about something in the mail it might have been thrown away, but after the EJ process they know what matters and they can decipher notices." In the end, Hasson said, planners should ask themselves whether or not they have created something acceptable to the residents of the area, and make adjustments from there.