

OPINION

PENNY NEWMAN: Fixing land-use mistakes, one neighborhood at a time

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Jurupa Valley is a vibrant new city, full of immigrant and working-class families. It was once a rural area of lush vineyards and local dairies. However, because of poor land-use planning, the neighborhood is now surrounded by massive warehouses.

In Jurupa Valley, Mira Loma Village residents used to enjoy beautiful views of the mountains, but over the last few years the area has quickly urbanized with industrial warehouses. These days, residents are boxed in by tall concrete walls and smothered in the pollution of more than 800 diesel trucks that pass through the area every hour. On top of the culture shock due to loss of open space, their health has also deteriorated due to poor air quality. Not surprisingly, the Inland Empire has some of the dirtiest air in the nation.

Many of the challenges in Jurupa Valley trace back to poor land-use planning, which is a leading cause of environmental inequities across California. Discriminatory land-use practices have put the overwhelming majority of polluting industries in the backyards of the most disenfranchised, right next to our homes and schools. Consequently, low-income communities and communities of color suffer from exposure to toxic chemicals, leading to higher rates of asthma, birth defects and cancers.

Right now, the Legislature is considering Senate Bill 1000 by Sen. Connie Leyva, D-Chino, a bill that will require cities to have an environmental justice element in their general plans. SB1000 passed the Senate on Wednesday, and now heads to the Assembly.

A general plan sets forth the vision and goals for a city's future. The EJ element is recommended by the state agency that oversees land use, but, unfortunately, few cities have adopted one, and often fail to prioritize environmental justice and equity in land-use planning.

An EJ element provides an institutional mechanism to assist cities and counties in identifying and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable neighborhoods in their boundaries, which can also help them access public funding.

We've seen the benefit of an EJ element here in the Inland Valley. For decades, Mira Loma's land-use planning process allowed industrial uses to be placed next to homes and schools. Finally, as part of a settlement in 2014, Jurupa Valley became the second city in our state to adopt an EJ element in its citywide General Plan, and 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.

Today, Jurupa Valley residents can breathe a little easier, and with SB1000, more communities across the state can, too. We need to give the health of our most vulnerable communities – those often forgotten in the process – the priority they deserve, and an EJ element helps us do that.

We have an environmental health crisis in our state and we can't afford to continue to make land-use decisions that harm our communities and our climate. I have seen firsthand how land-use planning can be an empowering tool for communities to reimagine how neighborhoods can look, and I want to see SB1000 pass to ensure that all local governments proactively plan for and address environmental justice concerns at the outset when developing long-term goals, policies and visions for the growth of their cities. Now is the time to start fixing land-use mistakes, one neighborhood at a time.

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