

# EAST BAY TIMES

## Opinion: Make environmental justice key to Oakland planning

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California's wildfires forced many Oakland residents to stay indoors. For those living near industrial facilities and already struggling with asthma, the fires exacerbated environmental and health issues built up over time.

In the East Oakland flats, homes are intermixed with industrial land uses. Interstate 880 traverses the heart of the neighborhood, carrying diesel trucks from the Port of Oakland, the fifth busiest container port in the nation, spewing high amounts of toxic air contaminants daily. Other pollution-producing industrial facilities are next to homes and near elementary schools and a library from which you can smell noxious odors.

Many of the challenges in East Oakland trace back to poor land-use planning, a leading cause of environmental inequities across California. Discriminatory land-use practices have put the overwhelming majority of polluting industries in the most vulnerable communities.

Consequently, low-income communities of color suffer from exposure to toxic chemicals, higher rates of asthma, birth defects and cancers. Improving land use is central to creating healthy neighborhoods.

The city of Oakland is due for an update to its General Plan. Understanding that land-use planning shapes the future of cities and remains a leading cause of environmental inequities, community members in Oakland are organizing to ensure that officials listen to the needs of long-time residents who have been asking for improvements in land-use zoning.

A new law, the "Planning for Healthy Communities Act" (SB 1000), requires cities to consider an Environmental Justice Element in their general plans. To assist in the implementation, the California Environmental Justice Alliance and Place Works Inc. have released [a new toolkit](#) that showcases best practices and strategies for successful community engagement.

Our resident leaders must be part of the planning process to ensure the vision in the General Plan reflects the vision of the existing community. Through their experiences, they are the experts, having endured the results of previous policies that have created land-use and other inequities in Oakland.

By identifying heavily impacted areas, we can begin to engage residents in participatory research to collect some of the technical data and vision needed for a plan.

Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) has brought members of the community into the process to create Oakland's Healthy Development Guidelines, which help city planners ensure that new developments mitigate negative health impacts and promote benefits. This set of standards related to the environment, safety, economic opportunity, food, transportation, housing, and open space and recreation must be adopted by City Council.

Additionally, CBE is one of the organizations supporting the Congress of Neighborhoods to empower East Oakland residents in addressing historical injustice and disinvestment as well as gentrification and displacement.

Now, Oakland's Planning Department must engage with community-based organizations like CBE that are already doing important work on the ground. The planning process must tap the knowledge of residents because solutions won't work if they don't work for the people who live in the community.

To help reduce negative health impacts, we urge the city to create buffer zones by planting trees and cooler landscaping between homes and schools and nearby industrial facilities; hire local to bring more economic power to the city; increase the amount of affordable housing for low-income families and maintain affordable rents; and allocate more public transit funding to make transportation more equitable and improve infrastructure.

We can no longer afford to make land use decisions that harm our communities and climate. With SB 1000, we have the potential to

strengthen policies in Oakland – and it is critical that residents are engaged in decisions that will impact the health of their neighborhoods.

With the right implementation, SB 1000 can help move forward equitable zoning updates and practices that will look more closely at the disadvantaged areas that have been left out of previous updates. Through a community-driven General Plan process, land-use planning can protect the health of Oakland and ensure future generations can live in a sustainable environment.

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