

A Green New Deal for Oakland

How a progressive climate vision might help my hometown

BY JULIAN BRAVE NOISECAT DECEMBER 5, 2019

On a mid-October afternoon, Colin Miller and I sat at a picnic table outside the Rainbow Recreation Center on the corner of Seminary Avenue and International Boulevard in Oakland, California, to discuss how a Green New Deal might transform these asphalt plains in my hometown. Miller, 35, who lives up the block, is the coordinator of the Oakland Climate Action Coalition, a 35-organization alliance working to influence a citywide plan to reduce emissions 56 percent from 2005 levels by 2030. Their goal is to make that plan as equitable as possible by prioritizing investments in the poorest and most polluted neighborhoods, like this one in East Oakland.

In his rectangular glasses, cargo pants, hiking boots, and red teacher strike T-shirt, Miller, who is originally from Eugene, Oregon, has a real down-to-the-urban-farms vibe. He is a revolutionary, in a 21st-century sense. “Our mission is to build the resilience of frontline communities for a just transition away from extractive industries and towards a regenerative economy,” he said.

The climate crisis, perhaps more than any other issue, demands an economy-wide transformation. The power of the Green New Deal is, quite simply, that it is the first national platform to take the scale, breadth, and speed of that transformation seriously. But while the national movement for an FDR-style environmental program has mostly unfolded in the halls of Congress, on cable television, and across our Twitter feeds, Miller has been organizing for a

real-life green transition that doesn't have to wait for the outcome of the 2020 election. In November, Oakland Climate Action will host one of its last neighborhood meetings in the gymnasium of the Rainbow Rec Center so that the community can vote on what it actually wants to see in what is effectively a local Green New Deal. And in early 2020, Oakland will learn if it has won a coveted multimillion-dollar Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) implementation grant from the state—a down payment that would enable the city to become one of the first to break ground on a vision that remains, for most of the country, contingent on the political fortune and legislative will of Democrats.

The place where Miller and I sat, the corner of International and Seminary, is smack-dab in the heart of the concrete gridiron of East Oakland, a rectangular swath of the city about a dozen square miles in size bordered by Interstate 880 to the west, Interstate 580 to the east, Lake Merritt to the north, and the City of San Leandro to the south. East Oakland is home to about a fifth of the city's residents—mostly black, Latino, and low-income. Hemmed in by freeways, dotted with polluting industries, littered with the skeletons of old factories, redlined into real-estate oblivion, and policed like a conflict zone, East Oakland is what environmental justice advocates describe as a “frontline community” owing to its position on the hazardous edge of poverty and contamination.

But it wasn't always this way. Oakland, a port city, was once called the “Detroit of the West.” In prior decades, residents—many, black families on the Great Migration out of the Jim Crow South—found jobs on the docks, at the railyards, and in the assembly lines that were once the economic engines of the region. But in the 1970s, in a story that has become all too familiar, those jobs started to leave. Gangs, heroin, and crack cocaine filled the void. In the 1990s, the San Francisco Examiner took to calling Oakland “Murderville.” (A few years back, I knew personally three people on the city's homicide list.) Although violent crime is now declining, the city is still regularly cited as one of the most dangerous places in America.

But while violence made Oakland notorious, pollution is what actually makes it dangerous to the largest number of residents. As Miller and I talked, a northeast breeze off the bay carried the sour metal smell of a foundry up International Boulevard. An after-school group, their superhero-themed backpacks larger than their adolescent torsos, filed into a local rec center, guided by a chaperone. The science says that particulates in the air—from the foundry as well as from the smoke produced by a local crematorium, the largest on the West Coast, combined with the exhaust spewed from the tailpipes of cars zipping along freeways—are responsible for higher rates of asthma, heart failure, stroke, and cancer. East Oakland has the lowest life expectancy of any neighborhood in Alameda County. A black child born in these flatlands will live, on average, about 15 years less than a white child born in the more affluent hills, according to the Alameda County Public Health Department.

IN THEIR LIFETIME, assuming they stay in Oakland, that child and their family will likely pay a lot more money to be here than anyone else—at least as a proportion of their income. Nearly half of Oakland renters are housing cost burdened, according to Policy Link, which means they spend more than 30 percent of their paychecks on rent. People of color and the poor are disproportionately represented among this tenant class, with 63 percent of black households, 58 percent of Latino households, and 76 percent of very low-income households paying unsustainable proportions of their take to keep a roof over their head.

The city has talked a big game when it comes to affordable housing, according to Miller, but it has largely failed to deliver. Since 2016, when Mayor Libby Schaaf set an ambitious goal to build 17,000 new homes by 2024, Oakland has issued construction permits for more than 10,000 new units. But just 7 percent of that construction will produce homes for low-income families—far less than the 28 percent Schaaf promised.

The Green New Deal is a national platform for economy-wide transformation. Meanwhile, communities have been organizing for a real-life green transition that doesn't have to wait for the outcome of the 2020 election.

As a consequence, Oakland's fastest-growing population might actually be its homeless. A one-night count in 2019 enumerated the city's street population at 4,071—up from 2,761 just two years earlier. Homeless encampments and shantytowns have risen in parks, under freeway overpasses, and in the shadows of BART tracks across the city.

With companies outgrowing Silicon Valley and San Francisco, the Oakland housing market has reached unprecedented highs, turning historically disinvested areas into targets for speculators. Fortress condominiums plated with floor-to-ceiling glass windows and filled with tech bros and millennials are sprouting up in neighborhoods where, not so long ago, you would be hard-pressed to find a vegetable, let alone an oat milk latte. With market-rate rent rising at more than four times the rate of inflation, according to RentCafé, longtime Oaklanders are departing for distant suburbs over the hills in Concord, Modesto, and Stockton. Some commute as long as two hours each way daily to maintain blue-collar and service jobs, and gigs in the proliferating app economy of their hometown. There is an overwhelming sense that the city is in the throes of reconstruction—just not for the people who already live here. “So often more bike lanes and more trees are only going to benefit people who are going to move here afterwards and not

people already here in the community,” Miller told me. “We’re aiming for urban greening without displacement.”

Although the community has yet to vote on its final priorities, Miller and the Oakland Climate Action Coalition envision an unprecedented build-out of green and affordable housing near BART stations; bus stops serviced by electric vehicles; parks linked by bike lanes on streets lined with trees that stretch from the hills to the shore; community-owned and -installed solar panels on roofs and in public spaces; a distinct “Cultural Zone” to incubate black-run enterprises; and cooperative grocery stores that sell locally grown fruits and vegetables. Something green and new for a community that has gotten a raw deal for far too long.

Miller speaks with urgency, purpose, and a hint of frustration. “People want to see change but people are also really tired of planning processes,” he told me. “Planning processes have happened before and promises have been made by the city and they haven’t been kept. A lot of folks are really cynical and skeptical.”

AS THE HOUSING crisis reaches a breaking point, the climate crisis also appears to be reaching some tipping points, at least regionally. A week after Miller and I hung out, dry gale force winds led Pacific Gas & Electric, the private utility monopoly, to shut off power to nearly two million Californians, including some residents of Oakland, like my mom, out of fear that downed power lines could spark wildfires. The inferno came regardless. Nearly 200,000 residents of the North Bay were forced to evacuate their homes. Ash rained down upon them as they departed cities like Santa Rosa and Lafayette. Some packed up belongings and said goodbye to structures abandoned or rebuilt after last year’s fire season. When I called from Washington, D.C., to check in, my mom described the Bay as having “an apocalyptic feeling.”

During the fires, Mom and her boyfriend took a little trip to visit a relative incarcerated at a nearby penitentiary. They drove through one blacked-out community after another, in a brown soupy haze that engulfed parched lands as far as the eye could see, all the way to the Sierra

Nevada mountain range. “The smell can be reminiscent of a fireplace, but you realize, as you breathe in, that that positive reference point is deceptive, and what you’re smelling is something that’s toxic and choking and polluting,” Mom told me over the phone. “The air in the Bay was thick and particulate enough that it made you feel like breathing was a chore, and I felt fatigued.”

As I write, the air in Oakland is unsafe, the power is off, the homes are unaffordable, and the fires are coming. People are living in shacks on streets built and run on the blueprint of American apartheid. The soon-to-be Atlantises of Miami, New Orleans, and Houston are often positioned as ground zero for the climate crisis—and justly so—but in Oakland, the imperative to act is just as strong. In our current market, the public purse, which is, at least in theory, more concerned with people than profit, is likely the only way to bend the boom toward justice.

Oakland needs to win one of the few TCC implementation grants, worth up to \$30 million and funded by revenues raised from the state’s cap-and-trade program, to get started down that road. (The coalition won a planning grant worth \$170,000 last year, so things are looking up, but in a world of scarcity and competition, nothing is a sure bet.)

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Oakland, and subsidizing next-generation

transportation infrastructure in the most polluted

high-traffic areas.

The TCC grants, which prioritize equity and anti-displacement alongside emissions reductions, could be a model for a federal Green New Deal and for similar climate programs in states across the country. Adrien Salazar, an organizer with the NY Renews coalition that recently won passage of the New York state Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, says his

colleagues based their own equitable-investment targets on California law, which mandates that at least 25 percent of climate funds go to frontline communities. “The California climate investments program has really set the standard for the rest of the country to mobilize massive amounts of funding for greenhouse gas reductions in the communities that most need it,” he said. “It definitely serves as a model for other states and for something similar at a national Green New Deal level.”

IRONICALLY, WHAT LOOKS like a national model was, for California’s environmental justice communities, actually an inadequate compromise. The TCC grants are but one piece of the state’s Rube Goldberg-ed cap-and-trade regime. Over the last 13 years, California has developed its own emissions reductions policies through a series of bills whose alphabet soup names—AB & SB 32, AB & SB 535, AB & SB 398, etc.—are about as mystifying as their contents. In broad strokes, though, these laws developed carbon-trading programs that put a cap on greenhouse gas emissions. Environmental justice advocates, however, criticize this approach for allowing big corporations to actually increase hot spots of pollution in communities on the fence lines of industrial sites. “Here’s how it’s fucked up,” said Mari Rose Taruc, former co-chair of the California Environmental Justice Advisory Committee. “The largest polluters and richest polluters can get away with polluting more because they can just pay for it.”

Environmental justice groups were originally opposed to cap-and-trade on these grounds—and the research appears to justify their position. But when implementation of a market mechanism appeared inevitable, they decided to pivot, going along with cap-and-trade while arguing that revenues raised from carbon credits should help clean up the harms in communities.

Cap-and-trade revenue now goes into the California Air Resources Board Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. The state legislature votes on how to allocate those funds, which are administered through 20 state agencies that control programs like the TCC grants.

Environmental justice groups wrote the principles governing how those funds are spent. It all

sounds a bit dull and bureaucratic (and it is), but it also genuinely transformed how environmental programs function in California, said Taruc.

Now, the state isn't just planting trees in suburban parks, it's also greening concrete jungles like Oakland. And instead of only building electric-car charging stations in affluent neighborhoods where families can afford to buy Teslas, California is now subsidizing next-generation transportation infrastructure in the most polluted high-traffic areas. Advocates and policymakers are now working on a region-by-region and sector-by-sector strategy to maximize job creation in a clean-energy transition built from the ground up.

Lessons learned in this grand California experiment could reach all the way to the Beltway. "I'd like to see California keep pushing the left edge of the conversation so that the federal bill can be as good as it can be at that stage," said Katie Valenzuela, the policy and political director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance. "California has an important role to play in setting that vision and in showing what's possible in an economy as large as ours." Which brings us back to Miller.

After about an hour of conversation, Miller and I got up from that picnic table and started walking back up Seminary. When I was a kid, my mom would hang a left right here at International on our drive to baseball practice. I haven't lived in Oakland since I graduated high school. But despite all the changes this decade, the city—perpetually rattling to the bass of hip-hop streaming out of rolled-down car windows; nourished by corner stores, mercados, and street vendors; patrolled by cops, gangs, and preachers; and inhabited by tough, big-hearted, and slick-tongued folk who often refer to their burgh simply as "The Town"—still feels like home. With the invisible hand of gentrification caught in a boxing match with the defiant fist of a Green New Deal, I wonder how long that familiarity will last. A warming world makes change both inevitable and imperative. The question is what that change will look like.

Businesses, members of Congress, and the next president will have some say over all of this—but it's also going to be people like Miller, fighting to make sure our city remembers the community when it takes on the climate, who shape that future.

After a few minutes' walk, we reached Miller's place, a townhouse that doubles as the coalition office, a few blocks up from the rec center. The property, which Miller shares with a few roommates, has a half-acre backyard somewhere between a garden and urban farm planted with 30 fruit trees: persimmons, pears, apples, plums, peaches, mulberries, and nectarines. Miller and his roommates maintain a coop with four chickens (there used to be six, but raccoons nabbed two unlucky ones), and a beehive. One of the housemates sleeps in a yurt out back. A friendly fluffy cat named Gandalf the Orange patrols the plot. Miller told me he hopes to someday hand this little green oasis over to the Sogorea Te Land Trust, which is run by a local Ohlone Indigenous woman—his own share of reparative justice. But first, Miller needs to win a Green New Deal for his neighbors. Although the pieces are falling into place, Miller is weary.

"I don't want to waste the community's time," he said when we parted ways at his front porch.

"We don't have time to waste."