

Planning for Healthy Communities: Putting Environmental Justice into General Plans

Imagine a California of healthy and thriving communities, where urban and rural neighborhoods have the tools to help prevent and reduce industrial pollution, provide open space and local organic food, develop affordable housing, preserve local culture, generate good jobs, and conduct community-led planning to sustain this vibrant future.

Such a state may be achievable through [Senate Bill 1000, *The Planning for Healthy Communities Act*](#). Authored by Senator Connie Leyva and co-sponsored by the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) and the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice in 2016, SB 1000 requires cities and counties to adopt an Environmental Justice (EJ) element as part of their General Plans, or to integrate EJ-related policies, objectives, and goals throughout other elements of the General Plan. SB 1000 also foresees a process to allow local residents to become meaningfully involved in the decision-making around EJ issues.

Beginning January 1, 2018, the requirements of SB 1000 will take effect when a local jurisdiction updates two or more elements of its General Plan. Jurisdictions may also voluntarily adopt an EJ element or integrated policies at any time.



Addressing Historical Inequities in Planning

"South Fresno residents have a harsh reality. They breathe in toxic fumes every day from neighboring industrial plants and diesel truck emissions. Many parts of the neighborhood lack sidewalks, street lights, and bike lanes, making it dangerous to walk or bike anywhere. And many residents lack direct 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."

-- Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, Fresno, CA

Although many cities and counties have long seen environmental justice and social equity as important issues, State law has not previously required consideration of EJ issues as a part of land use planning. In some cases, this has resulted in discriminatory land use practices that placed polluting industries right next to homes and schools and in the backyards of the most disenfranchised communities. Consequently, low-income communities and those of color are more likely to suffer from exposure to toxic chemicals, leading to higher rates of asthma, birth defects, and cancers than more affluent communities.

All this will change with SB 1000. All jurisdictions are now required to consider EJ issues in their General Plans, and to identify lower-income communities disproportionately affected by pollution and other EJ issues. Where these issues exist, jurisdictions are also required to create goals, policies, and objectives to address them. Thus the EJ planning framework doesn't just redress past inequitable environmental impacts on disadvantaged communities, it also leads to significant positive health and economic outcomes for the community as a whole.

SB 1000 requires jurisdictions to first identify environmentally disadvantaged communities (DACs), and then to address a minimum of seven EJ-related issues:

- Pollution exposure (including air quality)
- Food access
- Public facilities
- Safe and sanitary homes
- Physical activity
- "Civil" engagement ("community engagement" in this article)
- Prioritization of improvements and programs addressing the needs of DACs.

These new legislative requirements are consistent with principles of good planning and the obligation that planners have to seek equity and equality, and to ensure greater inclusion of all people in public decision-making. Planning for EJ is actually embedded in the [AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct](#):

- *Principle 1e: We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence.*
- *Principle 1f. We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.*

Under SB 1000, cities and counties must now craft comprehensive strategies in land use planning and community development that will improve public health, bring prosperity to their regions, and avoid displacing current residents.

Successful Environmental Justice Elements

Prior to the passage of SB 1000, environmental justice elements and area plans had already been successfully adopted by a handful of jurisdictions. These plans can serve as templates for other cities and counties that are beginning their EJ planning processes. Two examples of local agencies that have trail-blazed this new statewide legislation are the cities of National City in San Diego County and Jurupa Valley in Riverside County.

The City of National City's Health and EJ (HEJ) Element, adopted in 2011, was California's first EJ element. Creation of this new element arose out of local concerns over the city's long history of difficult EJ planning issues. National City has many blocks where auto body and car repair shops, along with other industrial uses, are located adjacent to residences and schools. In addition, the city's two freeways, the Port of San Diego, and a large industrial base release approximately 32,000 pounds of toxic air contaminants each year.

Spurred by both city and local community organizing efforts, National City in 2010 adopted a Westside Specific Plan that launched improvements in affordable housing, public transportation, safe pedestrian walkways, compatible land uses, and increased clean energy. The plan became a springboard for citywide land use planning efforts, including the development of National City's HEJ Element, adopted as part of a comprehensive General Plan Update. The City also adopted an amortization ordinance granting it the authority to discontinue incompatible land uses in areas with sensitive populations.

As in National City, Jurupa Valley residents suffer from various ailments stemming from the exhaust of more than 800 diesel trucks passing through the city every hour.

As part of a legal settlement in 2014, Jurupa Valley became the second city in California to adopt an EJ element in its citywide General Plan. Today, Jurupa Valley residents can breathe a little easier thanks to their Environmental Justice element. The City has installed high-performance air-filtration units in homes throughout its most affected areas and has also created vegetative buffers to absorb pollution. In addition, the City is developing a restrictive truck route to keep diesel trucks from passing near homes. As a result of its equitable and innovative planning practices, the City of Jurupa Valley's EJ Element was given APA California's 2015 Award of Merit for Advancing Diversity and Social Change.

A New Toolkit to Map a Path Forward

To support the effective implementation of SB 1000, CEJA has collaborated with consulting firm PlaceWorks to co-write the *SB 1000 Implementation Toolkit*. The Toolkit, available for download at <http://caleja.org/sb1000-toolkit>, showcases a range of best practices, methods, strategies, and policies for implementing SB 1000 that can be adapted to meet the needs of any of California's unique communities. The Toolkit suggests multiple methods for identifying DACs and important strategies for jurisdictions to follow to meet the requirements of the law. The Toolkit also offers principles and methods for facilitating successful community engagement, case studies that highlight model EJ planning practices in California, and potential funding sources to support SB 1000 implementation.

To comply with SB 1000 requirements, the Toolkit recommends a five-step process:

1. Introduce the process to the community.

Educate the public and local decision-makers about the goals and outcomes of this process and how the community will be involved. Listen to participants to learn what EJ issues will need to be addressed, and identify community members to engage during the planning process.

2. Identify Disadvantaged Communities (DACs) and document existing conditions.

The [CalEnviroScreen tool](#) created by the Office of Environmental Health Hazards Assessment on behalf of the California Environmental Protection Agency, can be used by planners to identify "low-income area[s] disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and other hazards." In addition to using CalEnviroScreen, the Toolkit also offers several other methods to independently identify DACs and even confirm CalEnviroScreen results on the ground.

3. Engage the community.

Achieving environmental justice requires well-crafted policies and plans, but also a demonstrated process for meaningful community engagement. To be accessible, transparent, responsive, and inclusive, the process should use a range of creative strategies such as storytelling, walking tours, social media, and listening sessions.

4. Develop goals, objectives, and policies.

The Toolkit provides specific guidance for each of the seven topic areas considered under SB 1000: Pollution exposure reduction, including air quality improvement; food access, public facilities, safe and sanitary homes, physical activity, community engagement, and prioritization of improvements and programs that address the DACs' needs.

5. Refine and adopt final EJ goals, objectives, and policies.

Revise the goals, objectives, and policies based on community and decision-maker feedback, then incorporate them in a draft EJ element or a set of amendments to existing elements. This will follow the typical review and adoption process, and, like other General Plan amendments, will require CEQA review.

In addition to these planning steps, the Toolkit also describes various regional, state, and federal funding opportunities that can support SB 1000 implementation.

The Bottom Line

SB 1000 opens a new chapter in planning for environmental justice. Although the legislation is new, resources are readily available to support cities and counties in its implementation. Achieving the adoption of EJ elements and policies in General Plans is an important professional responsibility that can transform California communities into healthier, safer, and more sustainable places in which to live and work.

This article was written collaboratively by CEJA, a statewide, community-led alliance that works to achieve environmental justice by advancing policy solutions; and PlaceWorks, a California-based planning and design firm that provides comprehensive planning services to support healthy communities.