

Coyote Valley: Building it Right

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Ever wonder what it would be like to build a city from the ground up? To create a vibrant and diverse neighborhood with parks, schools, community centers, libraries, transit stations, businesses that serve every income level, and employment centers that are accessible to all? In the Coyote Valley region of San Jose, a community-initiated planning process is making this vision of equitable smart growth a reality.

When You Deny A Voice, You Deny Equity

Traditional urban planning has usually excluded community members from any meaningful role. With little input from working-class residents, city councils have routinely ignored critical factors, such as living wage jobs, healthcare facilities, and affordable housing. A systematic failure to address these vital concerns has left many urban communities suffering from stagnant job growth and a lack of access to goods and services.

Yet, with the right coalitions, strategies, and ongoing commitment, community organizations can develop and advocate for a broad economic blueprint that puts social equity at the center of land use planning.

Raising Our Voices in Coyote Valley

Residents of San Jose, California have a unique opportunity to exert their influence on a city planning process in Coyote Valley, a largely undeveloped region of South San Jose. In 2002, the city council appointed a 20-member task force—comprised of developers, landowners, environmentalists, planners, local legislators, and labor leaders—to develop a Specific Plan for Coyote Valley, oversee the work of city planners, and serve as the council's advisory body. The broad planning guidelines established by the city council call for 25,000 housing units and 50,000 jobs, providing for some 80,000 new residents of San Jose.

In an effort to fundamentally change the economic development and land use process, Working Partnerships USA (WPUSA)—a coalition of community groups, labor, and faith organizations seeking a solution to the widening gap between the rich and poor in Silicon Valley—created a series of objectives for incorporating social equity into the Specific Plan:

Build enough affordable housing for all income levels. WPUSA initially won approval to make 20 percent of all new housing affordable. Later, the coalition got city council to mandate that 60 percent of the affordable units—entirely funded through developer contributions—be reserved for those making less than 50 percent of the median income for the area.

Guarantee living wage jobs. Although the city council set a goal of 50,000 new jobs, it did not specify standards for job quality. WPUSA wants to ensure that every job that is counted towards the city's goal pays a living wage.

Include healthcare services. WPUSA is working to incorporate two healthcare clinics in a land use process for the first time ever in San Jose. Most importantly, the clinics will be funded through the initial infrastructure financing of the project and not by a regressive tax on residents.

Provide access to public transportation. The Draft Specific Plan includes a fixed route transit system in Coyote Valley.

Protect open space and provide recreation facilities. Nine neighborhood parks and 3,600 acres of permanent open space have been incorporated into the Plan.

Shaping Your City Through Community Engagement

We hope that the social equity and environmental justice achievements of Coyote Valley—expected to have a profound impact on the lives of nearly 100,000 residents—will serve to illustrate how land use decisions can create extraordinary opportunities to design livable urban communities that avoid sprawl and congestion while integrating populations across race and class barriers. ■

Photo:

San Jose Department of Planning, Building and Code Enforcement staff meet with members of community during the Coyote Valley development planning process.

Credit: San Jose Dept. of Planning

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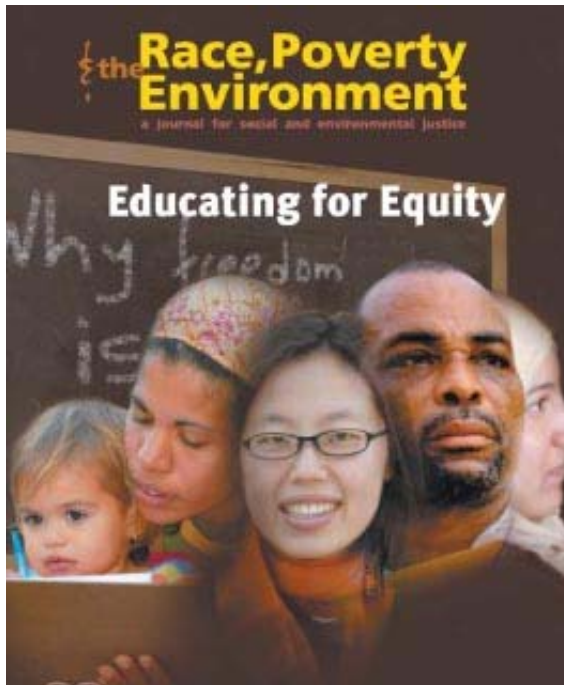
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