

1-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Carl Anthony, *Community-Based Approach to Redevelopment: The Case of West Berkeley*, 3 *Hastings West Northwest J. of Env'tl. L. & Pol'y* 371 (1996)

Available at: https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings_environmental_law_journal/vol3/iss3/1

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Community-Based Approach to Redevelopment

The Case of West Berkeley

*Carl Anthony*⁹

Those of us who have been involved in environmental justice struggles for a long time did not really have a name for this movement until the late 1980's and early 1990's. We realized that concern about protection of our environment—defined most broadly as the sum total of all influences that affect the survival and development of an organism or community of organisms—and the promotion of social justice were not really separate domains. They were a single domain, yet we had been struggling for the last generation to come up with an approach to environmental issues that kept the social and the ecological separate.

I would even go further and say it probably was a very good thing that in the heyday of the environmental movement, around the time of the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act, that social and economic issues were kept separate. Those of us that were involved in the social activism of the 1960's really did not understand how important the protection of wildlife, air quality, and water quality was. Those early environmental activists, for all of their distortions, were able to make the point that we were actually undermining the basis of life on the planet. That lesson would not have been possible if they had not taken a very hard stand on the necessity of a separate movement on behalf of the Earth.

But thirty years later, we cannot afford to continue to approach these issues in the same way. We need to understand that social justice and environmental protection are really opposite sides of the same coin. One of the places where we can see this clearly is in our urban communities. We have a situation in North Richmond which we will be talking about later today. The settlement of North Richmond truly illustrates the ways in which the dynamics of social justice and the environment are interconnected. Those of you who are familiar with the history of the Chevron plant in North Richmond will know that the Chevron company (previously Standard Oil) was located in that particular place long before the African American community came to North Richmond. It was designated as an industrial area. During the Second World War, when there was a national mobilization to fight in the Pacific, a large number of migrants from Texas and Louisiana and Alabama and other places in the South came to the Bay Area to work in the war industries. Due to racial discrimination, the people who moved to this area to help build the ships and fight in the war were not allowed to live in the existing residential neighborhoods of Richmond and Contra Costa County. So though North Richmond was basically a flood plain, the African-American community was forced to live in this marshy wetland. In North Richmond today, we see the results of the discrimination and segregation that occurred long ago.

⁹ Carl Anthony is the Executive Director of the Urban Habitat Program of Earth Island Institute. This speech was originally given at the Second Annual Hastings West Northwest Symposium, Urban Environmental Issues in the Bay Area: Economic, Social, and Legal Concerns and Solutions from an Environmental Justice Perspective, March 23, 1996.

I mention this case because it illustrates a number of very complex issues. In the first place, housing should never have been built in the flood plains. All across the country African-Americans and poor people are forced to live in what they call "bottoms" As a result, all over the country people are forced to live in these neighborhoods and end up with water rising in their basements. But what we now call "wetlands" perform very important ecological functions, and the damage that comes from improper siting of residential development is serious. So the issues of environmental protection and social justice are intertwined.

I had an opportunity recently to read a really chilling book by Jonathan Kozol called "Amazing Grace." In this book he described the conditions that exist in South Bronx. One particular incident that I found extremely chilling was about an eleven-story housing project in the South Bronx. The children were playing in the hallway on the eleventh floor and the elevator door opened and a child fell down the elevator shaft. The actual reason that this happened was because of cut-backs in the area of public finance. The city did not have enough building inspectors to inspect publicly-owned housing projects. So what they did instead was put up a sign saying: "No playing in the hallway." When this tragedy happened there was a great deal of furor about it and of course the housing authorities said, "well it wasn't our fault. We put a sign up on the wall that said, 'no playing in the hallway.'" This is the piecemeal approach that we continue to apply to many of our environmental issues. "No fishing," for example, in San Francisco Bay waters which are polluted.

I want to suggest a couple of simple themes for your consideration today. There is a nationally emerging interest in looking at the lands that are located in our inner cities, under the rubric of "brownfields." Brownfields are abandoned industrial lands which have potential for new economic development and new activity. This initiative is a welcome opportunity to take a fresh look at ways to use abandoned land to meet our community needs. But it's very important, as we approach the issue of brownfields from a community perspective, to realize that those people who advocate a community-based approach to dealing with redevelopment of brownfields must establish a pattern of leadership not only from their own neighborhoods and communities but also from the public sector and private sector.

That is what I want to focus on and give you several examples from my own professional experience, going back over a number of years, in West Berkeley. The point that I'm making again is that, the community-based approach to brownfield development means assuming leadership not only in our own communities and neighborhoods but also in the public and private sectors.

I think it is fairly important to put this in a historical perspective, because once we start in with all the "buzz words" people think this is something we started last week. But actually we've been involved with the struggle in environmental justice in the redevelopment of urban areas for a

pretty long time. When Mayor Johnson in 1968 came to power as the mayor of Berkeley, there was an idea that the City would build an industrial park based on the model of Silicon Valley. They proceeded to establish a re-development plan for West Berkeley, and the re-development plan called for the elimination of a very large percentage of the housing stock of the poor people, mostly people of color. These poor people thought of "urban renewal" as "urban removal." And this was actually the concept, to eliminate housing in that particular area and get rid of the blight, which at that time meant getting rid of the people of color. This plan was adopted by the City Council and the Redevelopment Agency was established. The plan was in the early stages of implementation when an outcry went up in the community.

People sat down in front of the bulldozers and eventually found it necessary to sue the Redevelopment Agency in order to stop the plan. But even with this activism and the law suit, the community found itself at a disadvantage. So a number of people decided that they were going to run for political office. There was a huge campaign effort in Berkeley resulting in an aggressive coalition coming to power as the City Council. Early in their agenda, an item was put on the ballot and passed which made the City Council the Redevelopment Agency. So, as a result of the suit which these reformers initiated many years before, it turned out that they were actually suing themselves, which was very strange. But the upshot of all this was that though they had the authority of the city behind them, this was still not enough. There were still big controversies as to what to do with the West Berkeley redevelopment plan.

What we were actually able to do was to develop a plan for this particular neighborhood in a fish bowl. In a series of open community meetings we were able to put together a set of planning documents that included the financing and architectural documents, all the way down to the permits. As a result of this public process, a plan was created and ultimately sold to the builder. The builder was quite pleased because he had no difficulty in getting the required permits since the plan that was in place was a community-based plan. The point I'm making is that the people of the community had to take the responsibility not only for coming up with a mission, but they also had to learn the nuts and bolts of how to put the project together, to deal in the public arena with questions such as, "how much is an appropriate return on investment for private developers?"

A similar situation emerged a few years later when the plan had been implemented. People had moved into the housing which was established as a mixed use, industrial zone, and they began to find that they were having problems because the housing was next to industry. What they thought was a very interesting living environment led to sickness and various other kinds of conditions. A nasty battle started to emerge between those people who really wanted to keep the area as an industrial area to protect some

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4,000 jobs and those people who were concerned with residential health and safety.

This battle began to split the community. On one side were people who were interested in clean air and the safety and emergency preparedness of this mixed use neighborhood. On the other side were those worried about jobs. As it turned out, most of the jobs they were fighting to protect were union jobs and most were held by people of color. The problem, of course, was that in order to maintain manufacturing, land prices had to be kept low enough to make that feasible. As a result of the new residential and upscale activity (such as the addition of boutiques and offices) land prices rose. The area had become gentrified. This was a problem, because as a result of becoming gentrified those manufacturing jobs were becoming more and more limited.

This conflict was especially painful for one person on the City Council who was actually appointed to be the Regional Planning Commissioner at that time. She had as her constituents the environmental groups, the labor constituency, and people of color—all groups that were at each other's throats. When she was appointed to the Regional Planning Commission she gave strict instructions to her allies, of which I was (am) one, who served on the Berkeley Planning Commission. Her instructions were: "Make it come out right!"

Well, actually we did make it come out right, and the way we made it come out right was that we actually respected the community's abilities to solve its own problems. We created an atmosphere where the people of the community could come together and face the decision-making for these tough problems. We went to the labor unions and asked them what they wanted, and they said they were interested in protecting these well-paid, union jobs. We gave them a map, just like this map we have here, and we said: "Put down on the map those jobs that you want to protect." So they put down about 4,000 jobs on the map, and said, "these are the jobs we want to protect." Then we asked them, if we could get a commitment from the environmental groups to protect those jobs, whether they would support any environmental measures that the environmental activists might propose. The labor unions said that if they could protect those jobs, then they'd be happy to do so. We went back to the environmental groups and told them the situation was extremely clear. We know what the labor unions want; we know what the blue collar workers want. They want to protect these jobs. They've agreed that if we can come up with a plan to save these jobs, they will support any environmental protections we come up with. We asked the environmental groups if they could work in that context. The environmentalists said they would be very happy to do that so long as there was no compromise on hazardous manufacturing activities and the nighttime noise.

So then we said: "Why don't we raise the standards even higher? Why don't we see if we can increase the number of manufacturing jobs? Why don't we see if we can go for the

brass ring and produce state of the art environmental protections?" So everyone got excited about the possibility of working on this. At the first public meeting we were able to look at about half of this 160 block area and find really simple solutions for addressing the problems. So that pumped up everybody. In one meeting we had something going for some eighty blocks and had solved most of the problems people were concerned about. It took another two or three months to work out plans for about fifty percent of the remaining blocks and people then realized that in fact we had solved the problem for maybe seventy-five percent of the site.

The community decided they were going to meet several times a week to finish the job. They would go block by block, job by job, and see if they could address some of the major problems. At the end of this process, which took about a year, we came up with the "West Berkeley Plan," which, in fact, has since been implemented. The plan called for the creation of buffer zones protecting manufacturing sanctuaries where the property values could be kept low enough to make manufacturing a viable option. It called for a concentration of city resources on the twelve worst polluters who create most of the problems in the area. It called for recognition of industries that actually exceed the legal requirements for environmental protections through an awards program. The plan was implemented and, of course, resulted in the number of manufacturing jobs in West Berkeley continuing to go up, even today.

The first test of the plan, however, was the Miles Cutter Laboratory. After we had implemented the plan with the unanimous support of the City Council, Miles Cutter, a pharmaceutical company, announced that it was interested in expanding its facilities in West Berkeley. The company had been acquiring land and had an expansion plan underway. I have to tell you that everything was wrong with this plan. Everything that they wanted in the development agreement was impossible. Our plan had a forty-five foot height limit in this area and they wanted eight-five feet. They had hundreds of radioactive animal carcasses coming out of this plant. They had class five organisms for doing chemical warfare experiments in the facility. They had been trading with South Africa. They had been doing experiments with bubonic plague. It turned out that the parent company had apparently built Auschwitz. And this in Berkeley!

So we just said: "Okay guys, this is what it is. What are we going to do?" We had over a hundred public meetings. Early on there was a discussion about whether we should just shut the place down and people decided that wasn't really a good idea because they wanted to protect the jobs and we had agreed on a policy to protect jobs. We ran across many, many different conflicts in the process of overseeing this expansion. It seemed as if we were coming to some kind of closure on this when the companies said they were willing to set up biotech academy so the black kids that live in South Berkeley will have a chance to get an education in this

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emerging field of biotechnology. The animal rights activists went bananas—they said: “We don’t want these kids doing vivisection in Berkeley.” What ended up happening was that the programs included the creation of an animal ethics program as part of this biotech academy.

So we went through each of the issues that people were concerned about. The whole process was an education process because we actually had to go through all the production processes to win a public agreement and get people to understand what the production processes were and what was necessary and what wasn’t. To make a long story short, we had promised the company, “we will have an answer for you on December 1st, but we can’t tell you if we have decided in your favor.”

As we got down to the wire it looked as if all the issues were solved except that one that everybody knew was going to blow up—which was that parent company had built Auschwitz and there was a book about this floating around the underground in Berkeley. The people who were interested in killing this process were passing the book to one another and getting all their facts lined up so they could blow the whole thing apart. And one of the women who was actually involved in the opposition came forward two weeks before our final vote and said: “You know I’ve been to a hundred meetings here in this process. This community has come together and has addressed every single one of the issues that I’m concerned about except this one.” She said: “You know I have people in my family who died in Auschwitz and I’m going to look out my window at this facility for the rest of my life. This is not any easy response for me but I think this is a good plan and therefore I would ask you to go ahead and vote to approve it.”

Now this is a process in which every single issue that people in the community were worried about was taken through a consensus process and the point of it (the most important point, in my view) was the building of the community, the empowering of the people to make the tough decisions that they have to make in order to face an uncertain future. So I want to leave you with this notion of the possibility of consensus.

The most important thing is that the people who are affected, whether it’s the workers or it’s the adjacent neighborhood, are empowered to take control of their future. B.F. Shumacher wrote a book called “Small is Beautiful” which reminds us that development does not begin with buildings. It begins with people, their education, their organization, and discipline.

For the last two or three hundred years we have seen a process in this country of land development and land development decisions that have been promoted and promulgated in ways which increased and destroyed the organization and coherence of our communities, particularly the low-income communities, working class communities and communities of color. We have an opportunity in this next round of redevelopment to correct this process.

We have a situation now over the last few years where lawyers have been getting together and figuring out how they can protect the interest of third-party investors and how they can protect the interests of insurance companies and various other people who are concerned with the viability of development. What has not been at the center of this is the interests and the needs of the community that is affected. It is those communities which are going to have to face the health hazards that are going to come with whatever decisions are made. They're also going to have to face the economic dislocation that may come and they are vulnerable to being blackmailed, blackmailed with the promise of jobs.

I think it's important for us to understand that the cities are caught in a very difficult position because of the way the tax laws work. Cities are engaged in a process called "fiscalization of land-use," which is to make land-use decisions in order to have revenues to pay for the existing service needs of the community. And this particular process is very detrimental to working people because the benefits that are supposed to go into the city coffers do not meet the needs of these communities. So they end up, in effect, being the sacrifice zones for the revenue needs of others who benefit. So it is important that we address these questions at the public sector level as well as at the neighborhood and community level. If we want to attract appropriate levels of development, we have to be able to look into these issues in ways that acknowledge that in order to attract private sector investment there is no short cut. We have to get into the nuts and bolts of how this can work and what these private investors plan to do.

I want to finish by saying that if we want to advocate a community-based approach to brownfields development (which the Urban Habitat Program believes is essential for brownfield development to mean anything) we must assume leadership not only in the neighborhood process but also the public sector and private sector process as well. Taking charge in that way will help us to solve many of the contradictions that come up in the process of redevelopment. This is an opportunity that is rare. It is an opportunity to take another shot at addressing issues that have been plaguing our communities for a long time. The future will depend upon our ability to provide the leadership that is necessary to make it happen.

