

Green Zones for Economic and Environmental Sustainability:

A Concept Paper from the California Environmental Justice Alliance



California Environmental Justice Alliance

Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, Communities for a Better Environment, Environmental Health Coalition, People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights



The mission of the California Environmental Justice Alliance is to strengthen the progressive environmental justice movement in California by building on the local organizing efforts and advocacy successes of our member organizations to achieve state policy change. We focus on California's communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, Central Valley, the Los Angeles region, the Inland Valleys, and the San Diego / Tijuana border region.

We are working to achieve environmental justice by organizing in low-income and people of color communities - those most impacted by environmental hazards - and by pushing for policies at the federal, state, regional and local levels that protect public health. Together, we are building a movement for environmental health and justice.

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GREEN ZONES: THE VISION

The California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) is launching a new initiative to support community-based visions for environmental justice and sustainable, community-based development. The new effort, called “Green Zones,” utilizes a comprehensive approach to transforming communities overburdened with environmental hazards and lacking economic opportunity into healthy, thriving neighborhoods.

The Green Zones initiative will create a federal designation for neighborhoods or clusters of neighborhoods that face the cumulative impacts of environmental, social, political and economic vulnerability. Communities with Green Zone designation would then be able to access benefits at the state and federal levels, ranging from targeted pollution reduction to increased funding opportunities for green, community-based development. Green Zone designation would ensure that communities most highly impacted by environmental hazards and economic stressors receive much-needed resources and support.

The Green Zones strategic approach combines a strong community grounding with tangible opportunities for change. The initiative will focus on creating benefits in three areas:

- **Reducing existing environmental pollution and improving land-use decisions** by drawing regulatory focus to those communities that have long shouldered the costs of unsustainable economic activity and land-use decisions and reducing pollution in overburdened communities.
- **Investing in sustainable, community-based development** by proactively connecting public and private resources to the designated neighborhoods, which will be able to access increased public funding and stimulate private investment in local, green development initiatives, such as renewable-energy and energy-efficiency projects.
- **Increasing community capacity and power** by grounding each Green Zone in an authentic, community-based planning and visioning process and utilizing participatory decision-making structures to ensure community voices guide regulatory action and identify needed benefits.

Neighborhoods eligible for Green Zone designation will be identified through the Environmental Justice Screening Methodology, developed by Rachel Morello-Frosch of UC Berkeley, Jim Sadd of Occidental College, and Manuel Pastor of University of Southern California. The methodology includes a robust ground-truthing component, in which community members are trained to verify the compiled data and enhance results with local expertise.

Green Zones allows clearly identified communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities that have borne inequitable burdens of environmental degradation to become the first in line for much-needed resources. Green Zones will provide multiple, coordinated opportunities that empower communities to achieve their visions for sustainability and economic opportunity and amplify the voice of residents in local decision-making.

Green Zones draws upon the remarkable work of environmental health and justice organizations throughout California to create systemic change. The members of CEJA have combined their collective forces to develop a new strategy that will advance a paradigm shift for bringing justice to our communities.

The following paper provides an overview of the conceptual framework for our pilot Green Zone initiative. We provide a brief discussion of why this effort is necessary and outline the key components of the Green Zone effort. We conclude with an outline of the types of benefits a Green Zone could potentially have for communities throughout California. This paper provides the broad vision of Green Zones, rather than a detailed description of policy implementation. It is a starting point, and we look forward to further developing this exciting, new effort in California with other environmental justice groups and government agency partners.

WHY GREEN ZONES?

Communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities face disproportionate burdens of environmental pollution and related health risks in this country. This inequity is a result of many factors: a history of residential segregation and discriminatory zoning, lower levels of political and economic power, and market-driven land use and economic development patterns that exacerbate the

concentration of environmental hazards in disadvantaged communities, while distributing their benefits elsewhere. Combined with the absence of meaningful economic and political opportunities, low-income communities and communities of color face many barriers to health and sustainability.

Communities across the United States have challenged this pervasive and systematic environmental injustice by organizing to increase their voice in the political, economic, and land use decisions that impact their health and quality of life. The collective building of political power for environmental justice has resulted in many victories in individual neighborhoods that have reduced pollution, prevented the introduction of new sources, and increased positive environmental amenities such as parks, open space, and affordable housing. CEJA members and other community groups have piloted innovative efforts to create multi-agency collaboratives, which focus resources and attention on an array of environmental justice problems, and have led successful community-based urban planning processes.

However, these local success stories have not led to the comprehensive change needed in many communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities. The “piece-meal” approach of many efforts, focusing on one issue or geographic area, is not sufficient to overcome systemic barriers to healthy environments and local economic opportunities. Public and private initiatives aimed at community revitalization in areas plagued by chronic disinvestment and abandonment have often failed to use transparent and participatory decision-making mechanisms, resulting in negative consequences, such as local displacement.

Given the continued challenges that many communities of color, immigrant and low-income communities face, CEJA has identified the need for a more holistic, and strategic, approach to neighborhood transformation. In developing the Green Zone concept, CEJA draws from the years of experience within its own members and other organizations across the country that have forged new paths with pilot programs and local work to secure environmental justice and sustainability. We have seen inter-agency, community-based collaboratives effectively address specific environmental hazards. Federal and state agencies have recognized the effectiveness of collaborative, integrated, place-based initiatives that focus on

directing resources to areas with the greatest need. We seek to enhance these models across a broader range of geographic and issue areas, advancing a more comprehensive strategy for change.

The Green Zones initiative moves towards a more integrated, overarching framework to foster sustainable, thriving communities. It shifts us away from fighting community health threats one-by-one to a more holistic approach based on principles of justice and sustainability, and grounded in community participation.

GREEN ZONES: FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY

The pilot Green Zones initiative will be implemented in several areas throughout California. After an evaluation of initiative success and needed adjustments, subsequent versions could expand to other communities.



Refineries in Wilmington impact the health of nearby residents. Photo courtesy of Peter Bennett.

The pilot effort includes the following components:

- Neighborhood identification: utilize the Environmental Justice Screening Methodology to identify the neighborhoods in each region of California that bear the highest cumulative impact of environmental risk.
- Community visioning: conduct community-based planning processes to identify needed resources and map resident visions for local change.
- Implementation: collaborate with local organizations to utilize new Green Zone programs, and create opportunities for Green Zone communities within federal programs.
- Assessment: evaluate the outcomes and lessons from the pilot initiative and scale up to work with a larger number of highly impacted communities.

Neighborhood identification: utilize the Environmental Justice Screening Methodology to identify the neighborhoods in each region of California that bear the highest cumulative impact of environmental risk

The Environmental Justice Screening Methodology (EJSM) is a feasible method of clearly and consistently identifying those communities that face the highest risk from environmental hazards, social and health vulnerability. Many regulatory agencies have acknowledged the need to focus resources on those communities who face such cumulative burdens, but identifying what areas are at greatest risk has been a long-standing challenge. The EJSM includes the most comprehensive indicators of environmental, health and socioeconomic factors. It integrates three measures to produce an overall cumulative impact score for a census tract.¹ This includes indicators of:

- the proximity of people to environmental hazards, and the number of sensitive land uses (such as parks and playgrounds, childcare centers, schools and hospitals);
- the exposure and risk experienced by residents from air pollution;
- the overall extent of social and health vulnerability, as measured by demographic, economic, health and political power indicators.²

The EJSM is a model of collaborative, community-academic research, developed in conjunction with CEJA members and containing a community-based ground-truthing component. Residents and allies in each of the targeted geographic areas will be trained to verify the accuracy of data and to incorporate local knowledge into the model. This not only verifies and enriches the results, but helps inform community members about their surroundings and builds local capacity. The methodology will be tailored for different geographic regions.

Community visioning: conduct community-based planning processes to identify needed resources and map resident visions for local change

The core of the Green Zone initiative is a community-driven visioning and planning process that will identify needed resources, agency actions, and local priorities for change through a comprehensive community plan. The process will draw upon CEJA's strong community base and networks and experience in community-based planning. Several members have already conducted similar processes, and the Green Zone initiative will elevate and expand these efforts.

The community visioning process gives residents an opportunity to proactively self-determine their communities and articulate visions for neighborhood change. It will provide a "road-map" for local Green Zone development, and ensure Green Zone programs and benefits reflect community needs. The visioning process will use strategies such as community surveys, trainings and planning charrettes to achieve authentic community participation from a depth of local residents, organizations and institutions. In doing so, it will create a higher level of community investment and trust in the Green Zone process and lay the foundation for sustained, long-term green development efforts led by community partners.

Implementation: collaborate with local organizations to utilize new Green Zone programs, and create opportunities for Green Zone communities within federal programs

Implementing the Green Zones initiative consists of two, linked efforts: partnership with local organizations to utilize and distribute new resources generated, and coordination with federal agencies to create specific Green Zone opportunities.

Green Zones in different cities will be tailored to meet local needs. A collaborative of organizations working in each area will ensure Green Zone development reflects the solutions identified by residents during the visioning and planning process, and connect Green Zone benefits and resources to residents.

A working group comprised of CEJA members and federal agencies will create mechanisms to prioritize Green Zones within existing public programs. This will ensure that Green Zone neighborhoods are “first in line” for much-needed resources. While the Green Zone designation will be federal, it will ideally facilitate the prioritization of state and local resources as well.

CEJA has initiated conversations with the Environmental Protection Agency Region 9 to coordinate this effort. We anticipate bringing additional agencies into the process to create a strong, interagency collaborative.

The successful implementation of Green Zones will depend on the active participation and coordination of a wide range of partners, from community-based organizations to agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. While the extent and nature of potential involvement of these agencies depends on the community vision that emerges for each Green Zone pilot, some of the agencies that might be called on to participate include:

Federal: United States Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Transportation, Department of Labor and Department of Energy.

State of California: California Department of Toxic Substances Control, Environmental Protection Agency, Air Resources Board, Division of Occupational Safety & Health Agency, Workforce Investment Board.

Regional: Air Quality Management Districts, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, Metropolitan Transportation Commissions.

Local: Health departments; building and code inspectors; city economic and workforce development departments; fire departments and hazardous materials response teams; city council, board of supervisors and mayor’s offices; planning commissions and departments; and departments of the environment.

Assessment: evaluating the outcomes and lessons learned from the pilot initiative and scaling up to work with a larger number of highly impacted communities

The Green Zones initiative is a new effort. Its implementation will require a fluid process of evaluation and adjustment throughout the course of the project. We will build in a dedicated assessment phase that will provide a critical opportunity to reflect on successes and lessons learned, and begin planning for a broader application of the best practices cultivated through the pilot initiative.

BENEFITS OF GREEN ZONE DESIGNATION

The Green Zones initiative will focus resources on most impacted communities in three areas:

- Reduce existing environmental pollution and improve land-use decisions
- Invest in sustainable, community-based economic development
- Increase community capacity and power



A student counts the trucks passing through her neighborhood in Barrio Logan, San Diego. Photo courtesy of Environmental Health Coalition.

Reducing existing environmental pollution and changing land-use patterns

Improvements in health and quality of life in the most impacted communities are not possible without first reducing the disproportionately high environmental risks many low-income communities and communities of color face. Green Zones designation would be a first step to focusing environmental protection efforts, including enforcement, inspection and compliance, regulatory attention, and direct interventions to reduce pollution.

Green Zones could reduce pollution through a variety of mechanisms, including:

- creating a priority enforcement designation within the permit programs of federal and regional environmental agencies.
- creating targeted incentives to reduce pollution and leveraging funds from public and private sources to directly reduce hazards, such as purchasing air and pollution filters or creating design solutions to buffer people from pollution.
- creating programs or appropriations within existing programs to support energy efficiency and conservation in designated communities.
- requiring pollution “caps” in emissions in designated communities.
- forbidding or requiring a higher level of scrutiny for new proposed pollution sources.
- facilitating the implementation of local cumulative impact measures by clearly identifying those communities that face the highest impacts from pollution sources.
- providing a mechanism for environmental agencies to coordinate and streamline their activities.

Given the close relationship between land use and environmental hazards, improving environmental quality in Green Zone communities also requires improvements to land use decisions and patterns. Green Zone designation can facilitate changes for a wide range of agencies, local and regional planning boards that engage in land-use planning in a number of ways:



Residents in the Central Valley demand clean air. Photo courtesy of Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment and Jenny Saklar.

- Community and specific plans can be developed with strong community participation that contain clear plans for zoning changes, economic development, affordable housing, transportation and other neighborhood priorities.
- General Plans, which create a set of long-term goals and policies that guide local land use decisions for cities or counties, can use Green Zones to identify priority geographic areas to focus environmental justice and health considerations during the General Plan update process and to enhance local efforts to improve community health and economic well being in those zones.
- Local planning commissions also can use the power of incentives to encourage sustainable economic growth in Green Zone communities. For example, the city of San Francisco offers a speeded-up permit approval process for buildings that meet Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) Gold rating. Similar priority permitting approaches can be explored as a way to encourage sustainable development in Green Zone neighborhoods.



Residents and CEJA member Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice worked for years to build a park in the predominantly low-income, Latino area of Riverside county. Photo courtesy of Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice.

Investing in sustainable, community-based development

Green Zones are not only a response to long-standing environmental harms in the most impacted neighborhoods, they are a movement towards a clear vision of environmental sustainability and justice at the local and global scale. The initiative builds on national efforts among environmental justice organizations to imagine a “Green Economy” that centers on transforming our overall energy economy into one that produces less greenhouse gases and generates good jobs for low-income communities and communities of color.³ We support a green economy that is based on principles of equity and local, sustainable employment opportunities in an array of sectors.

Green Zones will leverage a wide range of resources to improve sustainable job and development opportunities for local residents. While the specific needs and priorities of each Green Zone community will depend on the outcomes of local planning, the Green Zone designation can support community-based, sustainable development by giving priority consideration to Green Zones within various state, federal and inter-agency funding initiatives. Green Zones can potentially:

- Target Brownfield redevelopment funds, such as the Department of Toxic Substances and Control’s targeted site

investigation grant program and revolving loan fund, to speed up and enhance clean-up and redevelopment in Green Zone communities.

- Provide a mechanism to direct funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to the communities with the greatest need. While much of the \$787 billion in direct funding and tax incentives has already been distributed, much of this funding has yet to be allocated to specific projects.
- Increase access to billions of dollars distributed by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development designed to promote community and economic development in economically depressed communities.
- Encourage small and minority owned business and cooperative development, workforce development and local hire programs and requirements in Green Zone communities, through leveraged opportunities within federal initiatives such as the Federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998.
- Increase access to rural development funding, such as US Department of Agriculture’s Housing and Community Facilities Program and the Rural Community Development Initiative.

Collectively, these programs represent a critical resource for Green Zone communities to seed and cultivate deep investments in green, community-based development. By increasing the access and benefits provided to Green Zone communities, it can have the doubly beneficial effect of stimulating private investment in designated communities. New sources of funding and incentives for community-based, green development would draw in private businesses and groups along with other federal and state opportunities to promote community-based, sustainable development.

In addition to creating local, sustainable community development opportunities, Green Zones could incubate new programs and/or coordinate existing work to strengthen communities on a variety of levels. Funding through new Green Zone opportunities could support a wide range of activities, from education improvement initiatives to public transportation enhancements to improving the accessibility of safe recreational spaces. While much of this work may already be happening in a community, the Green Zones initiative can be a catalyst for coordinating these separate efforts.

Build community capacity and power

While reducing pollution and fostering community-based, green development is important, only with full community participation in program design and implementation and empowered local residents will the full range of needed changes be realized at a neighborhood level. Green Zones will foster community capacity, increased leadership and strengthen community power in a number of ways:

- The community planning process, which is the core of the Green Zone program, will empower residents to articulate visions for their neighborhoods. CEJA organizations have successfully implemented a number of community planning processes that give residents a voice in the development of their neighborhoods, thus increasing their capacity and their sense of agency. This process will provide a clear platform for community-identified needs and resources, thus amplifying the voice of residents.
- Green Zones development will be based on participatory, collaborative decision-making structures, which allow residents in designated communities to guide regulatory actions, funding

priorities, and development opportunities. Such engagement ensures the initiative reflects community priorities and can meet changing community needs. It also builds the capacity of residents to participate in local governance and policy.

- All Green Zone efforts will foster community control of resources and projects. This can be accomplished through a range of innovative structures, from land trusts for affordable housing to the creation of locally-owned cooperatives. This will build long-term opportunities for community development and ensure that resources developed through the Green Zone process remain within designated communities.

Clearly placing community involvement, control and empowerment at the center of the Green Zones initiative will also help address any unintended negative impacts or barriers within the Green Zones process. For example, if new development threatens to increase local displacement, community leaders can quickly identify the issue and develop new strategies to prevent gentrification.



Youth leaders take a “sustainable and resilient San Francisco” bike tour to identify opportunities for green development in the Mission District. Photo courtesy of PODER.

CONCLUSION

Today, communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities face unprecedented economic and environmental challenges. These same communities have a wealth of experience from decades of working to improve their neighborhoods that can meet and overcome these challenges, if given the proper support and opportunity.

At the same time, growing interest in and the acute need to transition to a more just and sustainable economic model offers an opportunity to revitalize neighborhoods that have been devastated by traditional, environmentally destructive economic activity and decades of disinvestment. On a policy level, there is growing federal agency support for a collaborative, place-based, problem-solving approach that targets those communities most in need.

The Green Zones initiative presents a new strategy to achieve healthy environments and thriving, local and sustainable development that all communities deserve. We have recognized the integrated approach to community transformation that is needed in order to address the long-standing environmental justice issues faced in communities throughout California. Ultimately, the Green Zone approach is an opportunity not just for communities of color, low-income and immigrant communities to become healthy, thriving neighborhoods, it is an opportunity for all of California to begin implementing the just, sustainable policies that are needed to face our changing world.

ENDNOTES

¹The Environmental Justice Screening Method is not the first screening tool for identifying most impacted communities. US Environmental Protection Agency Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance has developed an Environmental Justice Strategic Enforcement and Assessment Tool (EJ SEAT) which combines national level data from four categories: environmental, human health, compliance and demographics. While the tool represents an important advance in EPA efforts to prioritize national scale enforcement, a workgroup of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council has cautioned that the tool is not able to capture sufficient data to adequately identify environmental justice communities. National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee. (2010). Nationally Consistent Environmental Justice Screen Approaches: A Report of Advice and Recommendations of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Retrieved August 18, 2010 from: <http://www.epa.gov/compliance/ej/nejac/recommendations.html>.

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