

# From the Director's Desk

By Juliet Ellis, Executive Director

**T**his issue of *Race, Poverty, and the Environment*—Who Owns Our Cities—is particularly close to my heart. While not a professionally trained planner, I am a planning enthusiast and see land use and planning processes as important levers for change. Too often land use and planning are seen as irrelevant exercises designed for participation by the elite. But this should not be the case. It is time for low-income communities of color to take back their communities, one plan at a time.

Urban centers, made up mostly of low-income communities of color, have been subject to systematic and far-reaching disinvestment for decades. The result is reflected in the community's housing stock, employment rates, school quality, infrastructure, transportation systems, crime rates, open space, and amenities.

Over the last 10 years there has been a growing “rediscovery” of cities. It is now “cool” to live in urban centers. Unfortunately, it's resulting in widespread gentrification and displacement. And without deliberate interventions by existing community residents, organizations, and allies this rediscovery will not benefit everyone. As cities re-develop, basic infrastructure spending on roads, public transportation, parks, and schools go through planning processes that should be open to public participation. Unfortunately, all too often, the most impacted communities are unaware of opportunities to participate.

## Transportation Justice

One of Urban Habitat's first attempts at tackling one these planning processes was the 2006 update to the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). In the Bay Area, this plan is overseen by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), which is itself composed of elected officials from cities and counties across the region. In 2006, they allocated \$120 billion over 25 years to support transportation projects throughout the nine-county Bay Area.

Despite the critical importance of public transportation to low-income people and communities of color, there have been few public interest groups involved in these decisions.

However, working with many other community organizations across the region, Urban Habitat has advocated for more money for transportation resources to under-served communities. As a result, the MTC agreed to fund the Lifeline Program, which provides dedicated funds for transit projects serving the region's low-income communities. Over the last two years, we have won allocations of over \$359 million for the next 25 years. This funding is a small first step when compared to the depth of need or to the huge amount the Bay Area invests in rail expansion to the suburbs. But it showed that engaged communities can win a greater share of resources if they are at the table.

Urban Habitat continues our fight to equalize transportation investments. We've launched a two-year initiative for the upcoming RTP to advocate that low-income communities and communities of color receive an equitable share of transit funding and investments. For the first time, transportation justice advocates are targeting county-level transportation decision-making in an effort to have those transportation projects and priorities reflect the needs of transit dependent populations. So far, the Transportation Justice Equity Platform has been endorsed by 15 organizations, and both MTC and public officials have been receptive to the issue of equity principles.

## Richmond General Plan

Since we began our involvement in planning via transportation justice work, we have now moved into land use planning. Each jurisdiction in California is required to update its General Plan (a comprehensive



blueprint for land use and development) at regular intervals. Over the past 18 months, Urban Habitat and our partner organizations in the Richmond Equitable Development Initiative have been working to influence the General Plan update in Richmond, California. When we first considered engaging in a campaign around the General Plan we were skeptical.

We went into the process with many questions:

- Can this type of process result in concrete equitable development policies and implementation measures?
- Will local community groups sustain their engagement in this long-term “process heavy” effort, which seems counter-intuitive compared to traditional organizing campaigns that have obvious targets and short-term wins along the way?
- How will we build our capacity so that we can craft our own policies and implementation steps for inclusion into the final General Plan?
- Will the General Plan just sit on a shelf or will it guide future development for the city?

Fast forward to today and we are in the thick of the campaign. We have been able to present concrete policies and implementation efforts and mobilize the community to support them. We are hopeful that many of our recommendations will be supported by the city council. But the jury is still out on the big question: Will the plan determine future city development policy?

Our goal is to build a coalition that will be in it for the long haul but it will be years before the verdict is actually in. Meantime, working on this over the past year and a half has given me renewed excitement about planning. One of the most important things I have found is that planning allows you to be proactive.

Organizations like Urban Habitat are too often put in the position of being on the defensive and reacting to something that we do not want. While this is often out of necessity, it is also exhausting and can crush the spirit. Land use and community planning processes allows us to articulate a vision, think holistically about our communities, move outside of our issue silos, and get to scale.

This work has the potential of being the next evolution of community benefits work, which previously has focused on individual developers—one developer at a time. Targeting planning processes takes us upstream where we can change the rules of the game at the front end before a developer even comes to town.

The articles in this issue reflect the experiences of dozens of organizations across the country that are similarly trying to engage their communities to channel public resources toward the public good. While we may yet be short of the status of a full-fledged movement, the move toward equitable development as another tool in the progressive arsenal is well underway.

As always, we thank you for your support of our work and look forward to seeing you in person—whether at the planning commission or on the picket lines! ■

# & the **Race, Poverty Environment**



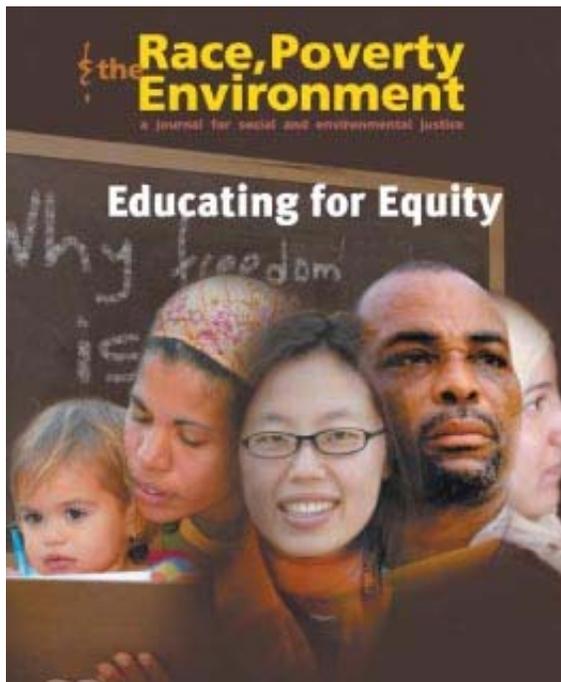
a journal for social and environmental justice

[www.urbanhabitat.org](http://www.urbanhabitat.org)

First published as a joint project of the Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, **RP&E** is now published twice annually by **Urban Habitat** and is dedicated to exploring the intersection of race, class, and environmental and social justice.

Don't miss any of our passionate, in-depth discussions of important social topics!

## Support RP&E: subscribe today!



Use the form below or order online:  
[www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe](http://www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe)

- Spring 1990 ▶ Earth Day
- Summer 1990 ▶ Cultural Diversity
- Winter 1991 ▶ Women of Color
- Spring 1991 ▶ Pesticides
- Summer 1991 ▶ Energy
- Winter 1992 ▶ The Summit
- Spring 1992 ▶ Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Summer 1992 ▶ Water
- Fall 1992 ▶ Native Nations in 1992
- Spring 1993 ▶ Urban Problems
- Summer 1993 ▶ Population and Immigration
- Fall 1993 ▶ Latinos and the Environment
- Spring 1994 ▶ Military Base Conversion
- Winter 1995 ▶ Environmental Justice and the Law
- Summer 1995 ▶ Nuclear Technology & Communities of Color
- Fall 1995 ▶ Social Justice and Transportation
- Spring 1996 ▶ Multicultural Environmental Education
- Fall 1996 ▶ The Border
- Winter 2000 ▶ A Place at the Table: Food & Environmental Justice
- Winter 2001 ▶ Reclaiming Land and Community: Brownfields & Environmental Justice
- Summer 2002 ▶ Fixin' to Stay: Anti-Displacement Policy Options & Community Response
- Summer 2003 ▶ Where Do We Go from Here? A Look at the Long Road to Environmental Justice
- Fall 2003 ▶ Governing from the Grassroots: EJ and Electoral Activism
- Summer 2004 ▶ Reclaiming our Resources: Imperialism and Environmental Justice
- Winter 2005 ▶ Burden of Proof: Using Research for Environmental Justice
- Winter 2006 ▶ Moving the Movement: Transportation Justice
- Summer 2006 ▶ Getting Ready for Change: Green Economics and Climate Justice

**Yes!** I want an annual subscription to Race, Poverty & the Environment.  
Sent free of charge to grassroots groups upon request.

\$20 (Individuals)       \$40 (Institutions)

**Yes!** I want to support the advancement of social, economic, and environmental justice in the Bay Area and beyond.

I want to support Urban Habitat with a tax-deductible donation of:

\$25    \$50    \$100    \$500    \$1,000    Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

A check is enclosed       Please charge my Visa/MasterCard

Visa/MC Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(Please include the 3-4 digit card verification number found on the back of most credit cards.)*

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_