

A Tale of Two Cities

By Diana Abellera

Typical city planning processes fail to provide the context and information residents need to be effective advocates for themselves. After participating in an innovative educational process as part of the Richmond Equitable Development Initiative (REDI), residents of Richmond, California, are prepared to take on urban planning at a whole new level.

Nicknamed the “City of Pride and Purpose,” Richmond once boasted a bustling downtown, a large and growing African American population, and a dedicated wartime workforce. Now the city is known for the toxins plaguing residents who lack buffers between their homes and the Chevron refinery, a \$35 million budget crisis that caused libraries and recreation centers to close, and a near state of emergency due to skyrocketing murder rates in 2005. A recent survey commissioned by the City of Richmond found that residents rated their quality of life lowest in comparison to 212 other jurisdictions in the United States.

However, movements in Richmond are trying to turn things around. A new Green Party mayor now presides over the city with intentions of holding polluting industries accountable. The city’s commitment to recovering from the budget crisis was acknowledged by the California Society of Municipal Finance Officers. The Tent Cities grassroots movement created makeshift communities around murder sites for nearly 40 days, resulting in reduced homicides in the surrounding areas. And Richmond is beginning to catch the eye of developers as the Bay Area housing market soars and developable land diminishes.

Richmond is divided into two seemingly separate places: Scenic waterfront views, market value homes, and beautiful parks make up one city below the highway, while blight, crime, and poverty plague the urban core above the highway. The community feels broken, separated by physical as well as by socioeco-

nomics. While outside investment in Richmond could revitalize the economy and help strengthen neighborhoods, it’s vital that provisions that protect the city’s low-income people and people of color must be in place to ensure that they don’t get left behind.

The Richmond Equitable Development Initiative (REDI) is a coalition led by Urban Habitat, Contra Costa Faithworks!, East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, and the University of California, Berkeley’s Center for Community Innovation. As Richmond updates its General Plan, the blueprint for development over the next 20 years, REDI is spearheading an effort to make sure that current and future development in the City of Richmond benefits all residents.

By bringing together city officials and those not traditionally engaged in planning, REDI hopes to increase local leadership and create a comprehensive strategy for equity. Using the General Plan Update as a vehicle for an inclusive process and implementation, REDI has brought together Richmond environmental educators, piano technicians, preschool teachers, Laotian community leaders, high school students, labor leaders, the mayor, city council members, and key city department heads. What do they all have in common? They all want the best for Richmond, and they all have participated in the REDI Equitable Development Leadership Institutes.

REDI launched the Leadership Institutes with an event that began a dialogue on equitable development that is continuing across the city. After the kick-off celebration, which brought all participants



together, people split into two training tracks, the “Base Building” and the “Electeds and Staff” Leadership Institutes. Each track ran several months, offering a safe place for the respective groups to learn from each other, strategize on planning policies, apply equitable development principles to their lives and work, and build relationships with each other. REDI coordinated key intersections throughout the process, providing ample opportunities for the two groups to exchange ideas and get to know each other’s viewpoints.

Held in the heart of the Iron Triangle at the Nevin Community Center, the REDI “Base Building” Leadership Institute solidified relations between the environmental justice and social justice groups Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Communities for a Better Environment, and Ma’at Youth Academy. Simultaneously translated in Lao, Mien, and Spanish, the trainings were tailored to help participants feed their concerns into the city’s formal process. Participants initially felt unsure of where the workshops were going: Where was the fight? Who was the target?

Gradually, people began to realize that Richmond could address current concerns through planning for future changes. The population was growing, requiring the city to accommodate more housing, create more jobs, and ease traffic problems. Participants grew to make these connections, shifting their civic perspective from “fight” mode to becoming proactive leaders in urban planning for the future generation.

The curriculum was structured to cultivate this



understanding. The first sessions focused on understanding participants’ concerns and needs through sharing stories and visions for Richmond. To facilitate connections between concrete issues and broader policy initiatives, REDI created an interactive Jeopardy game that broke down complex issues, such as amending the inclusionary zoning ordinance, instituting community impact reports, and instituting neighborhood planning. A bus tour of Richmond with the city’s planning director allowed participants to ask challenging questions about how to apply policy concepts to Richmond’s realities. The last session focused on implementing the campaign strategy: participants conducted a power analysis and practiced delegation visits with council members.

By the end of the Institute, the resident champions of equitable development were primed and excited to take action. They plugged into city-run community workshops to feed their ideas to the city. Sixteen-year-old Alyssa Hopper of Ma’at Youth Academy found prepping her message easy. “[Equitable Development] is like a multi-layer cake where everyone—every race, sex, income level, age, education level—has equal say in the development of their community... land use, economic development, housing, transportation, and health,” she said.

On the “Electeds and Staff” Leadership Institute track, REDI members spent months interviewing the majority of city council members and staff department heads to understand where each stood on important issues and the challenges and opportunities present. Key themes emerged out as topics to address in the workshops, such as what to do with the

Photos: (Left) Participant reviews land use planning map at Leadership Institute training.

(Right) City Council Members Tom Butt and Tony Thurmond and Mayor Gayle McLaughlin (right) commit to REDI equitable development principles at community meeting.



remaining developable land and how to create community ownership mechanisms. The REDI team thus became a resource for city officials, equipping them with ideas, tools, case studies, new relationships, and community support to help everyone move towards a common goal.

The REDI Leadership Institutes represent a model for building institutional capacity and growing leadership for social and environmental justice in the region. Each set of trainings is customized to the particular needs of each community, identifying any common ground and shared visions. The institutes rarely teach participants new material; rather, the facilitators identify root causes, help understand decision-making structures, and connect issues and people to move a larger body forward in action. They enable residents to feel empowered in their own communities. Richmond Leadership Institute participant Paul Larudee feels that “We live in a very desirable area—it’s up to us to decide how to develop.” He is now working to determine how a community land trust can preserve housing affordability in Richmond.

Graduates of the community-based leadership institute took their momentum and ran. After meeting with the majority of the city council to present their policy recommendations, the participants convened nearly 300 Richmond residents, officials, and other stakeholders at a community forum.

There, participants presented equitable development principles and policies and asked the community to formally endorse the Declaration of Equitable Development with Polaroid photos and signatures, creating an amazing picture representing Richmond. Fredericka Bryant, of Ma’at Youth Academy, captured the essence of the event when she said, “For the core of Richmond to thrive, residents need good jobs and a safe and healthy environment. The people of Richmond deserve a safe and just community in which to raise their families. We call on our elected officials and community members to endorse equitable development principles for Richmond’s future.”

The response? “I am delighted to join with REDI and those who share the same values I do of economic and environmental justice,” said Mayor Gayle McLaughlin as she and other council members in attendance endorsed the Declaration of Equitable Development. “We are reclaiming Richmond for Richmond residents.”

Having been dominated for so long by Chevron, residents and city officials alike feel it is time to prioritize the people. Although still a year out from adoption, the General Plan represents a vehicle for unifying the city with long-term vision and tangible impact. Local leadership and residents are working together to actively integrate equity into planning processes for a healthy and just Richmond. ■

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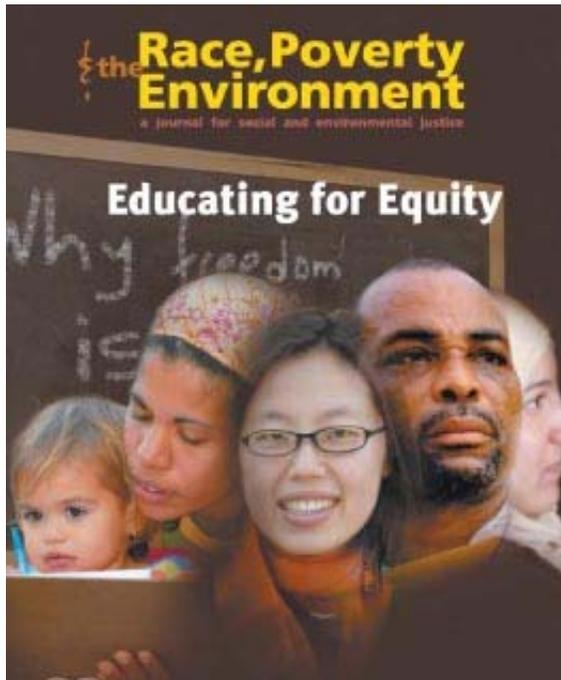
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