

From the Director's Desk

By Juliet Ellis, Executive Director



While the current recession has trapped countless people under the weight of a foreclosed home, unexpected loss of employment, or the evaporation of a life's savings, those who were struggling before this economic meltdown to meet their basic needs are more vulnerable than ever. This is certainly the case in Richmond, California where the housing crisis has resulted in more than 2,000 foreclosed properties, most of them in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Simultaneously, cutbacks in public transit services, fare increases, and the related dependence on automobiles, oil, and freeways are increasing the isolation of poor communities. At Urban Habitat, while continuing our long-term commitment to land use issues, equitable development, and regionalism, we have also been working hard to win basic rights in the two key arenas of housing and transportation.

As a founding member of the Richmond Equitable Development Initiative (REDI), a diverse coalition committed to ensuring that the city's low-income people and communities of color benefit from development policies and financial investments, Urban Habitat has been advocating the right to affordable housing for Richmond residents for over four years.

In March, Urban Habitat and REDI organized a town hall meeting on housing to hear community voices and to present a set of demands to elected officials from the city, county and state. Over 500 people participated—including families in foreclosure, renters, and concerned community members. Notably absent were the banks responsible for the majority of foreclosures in Richmond: Wells Fargo, Bank of America, and JP Morgan Chase. (See story on page 55.)

Emotional testimony from homeowners in foreclosure put a human face on the tragedy of this crisis, while data presented by REDI revealed the discriminatory patterns in mortgage lending to Latino and African-American borrowers of all income levels. REDI partners pressed officials to endorse a list of proposed actions, which include stopping all preventable foreclosures and setting long-term housing goals for the city.

A majority of the Richmond city council signed onto the platform and committed to focus on translating the recommendations into action.

On the transportation front, Urban Habitat was a keystone member in a broad coalition of groups that brought Measure VV to victory in last November's election, thus preserving low-cost AC Transit bus passes for youth, seniors, and the disabled. But despite the coalition's victory at the ballot box, the fundamental structural inequality in transportation funding and investment in the Bay Area continue. Bus systems which serve low-income people are shortchanged and expensive infrastructure projects are funded for billions. To secure transportation as a right, we need a fundamental shift in political power. We have now joined with others to build a national coalition. (See story on page 67.)

To get to the systemic issues that plague this country and the world, we need to confront the central problem of the haves and the have-nots—those that have rights and those that do not. At Urban Habitat, we define environmental justice very broadly: people have the right to live, work, and play in environments where they're not disproportionately burdened by toxics, or a lack of housing and transportation.

For the past 20 years, we have worked with community partners and progressive allies in labor, business, philanthropy, and government, to address the pressing issues that threaten our region's most vulnerable communities. As we move into a new economic, social, and political landscape, I look forward to our ongoing partnership. Please visit our website www.urbanhabitat.org, to learn more about all of our programs. ■

& the Race, Poverty Environment

a journal for social and environmental justice

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Juliet Ellis

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Copyediting and Proofreading

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the Race, Poverty Environment



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