

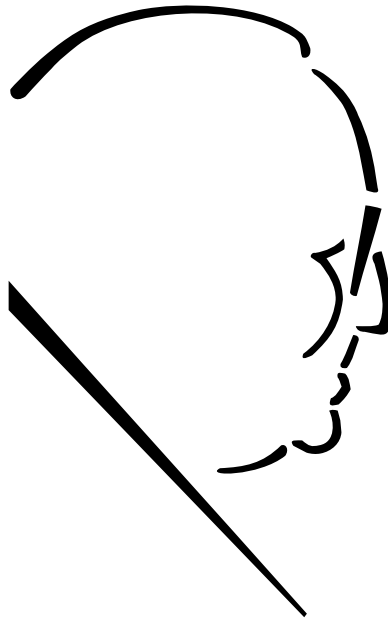
Environmental Justice and the Fate of Community Development in Southern California

The California Agenda

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Hon. Hilda Solis

Member, United States Congress



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It is nice to be here this morning with you all to discuss an issue very dear to me – environmental justice. For those of you not familiar with me, I am Congresswoman Hilda Solis and for the last 4 years I have represented East Los Angeles and portions of the San Gabriel Valley in Congress. Prior to being elected to Congress in 2000, I served on the Rio Hondo Community College Board and served in the California House and Senate.

I have seen first hand the damage that environmental injustices brings to poor and underserved communities. As a child, my six siblings and I grew up in the shadows of one of the largest landfills in the country. Our neighborhood was full of trash. I remember when my dad first got sick - he worked in a battery recycling plant and the chemicals in the air gave him lung infections. My family could not afford to travel to the beach for vacation, so my dad and mom took my siblings and I camping and picnicking in the Azusa Canyons, but we couldn't play in the river because it was polluted. As I got older I realized that not everyone lived next to a landfill, not everyone's parents get sick from their jobs and that there were a lot of kids who could play in the river or go to the ocean or hang out at a local park or play in a recreational sports league.

I took these lessons with me when I began working in the Carter White House Office of Hispanic Affairs and later became a management analyst in the Office of Management and Budget's Civil Rights Division. I was determined then and continue to be determined now to find a way to reverse the injustices that exist between one's income and protection from environmental pollutants. The environmental issues I focus on all have one thing in common - they directly affect our health.

Consider these statistics:

- There are only five National Parks near urban centers, yet urban centers have the greatest incidences of cardiovascular disease, asthma, diabetes, infant mortality, birth defects and cancer.
- In East Los Angeles and the communities in the San Gabriel Valley that I represent there is less than one-half acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents; but in neighborhoods where household incomes are \$40,000 or higher the ratio of parks to people is 40 times higher.
- In Los Angeles, more than 71 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latinos reside in areas with the most polluted air, and nationwide 70% of Latinos live in communities designated out of attainment for air quality. Only 34% of whites live in highly polluted areas.
- Latino children have asthma at more than two and one half times that of non-Latino white children.
- The death rate from asthma among African Americans is 2.5 times higher than for Whites.
- 10 million children under the age of 12 live near enough to a toxic waste site that their health is at risk.

These statistics give you the numerical face to the issue. There is one thing we can do locally. My bill, the San Gabriel River Watersheds Study Act, was signed into law in 2003. This bill directs the Department of Interior to study ways for the San Gabriel Valley to preserve and restore open, green and recreational space to improve the environmental potential of this long neglected area. I am very excited that the National Park Service is now beginning the study. What does that mean for the San Gabriel Valley?

This study lays the groundwork for the possibility of opening lots of doors for future federal funding for revitalization and recreation in East Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley. More recreational areas will give people a place to go when they are looking for nature. In the process, people will be educated about the community's environmental needs. The road to make this study happen has not been an easy one. This study is not about taking people's water rights or establishing a National Park in the middle of the San Gabriel Valley. The National Park Service is not going to de-cement the river or take property that isn't already theirs. This study is about finding out what the community would like to see - be it neighborhood parks or a cultural center or a bike trail - and then figuring out how the National Park Service can help us achieve that. This is a unique opportunity for the community to think long-term about how it envisions itself 10 years down the road.

I believe we need to start planning today and try to take advantage of what opportunities we can benefit from with the involvement of the federal government. The road to restore our environment and improve public health will be a long one. Last year the Washington Post wrote a story about a 4 - year - old boy named Elam. Elam's parents live in East Omaha, Nebraska, a largely poor inner city neighborhood on the edge of one of the nation's worst sites of toxic pollution. Elam was a normal child until age two when he suddenly lost the ability to talk and became hyperactive. His mother found a description of lead poisoning and realized it matched Elam's symptoms. Elam was found to have 4 times more lead in his body than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has determined is safe. Elam is one of 2,600 children with lead poisoning in East Omaha.

In my district, we have 3 superfund sites. I have been able to push very hard to make sure the Environmental Protection Agency cleans these sites up before our communities become unnecessarily poisoned. Not every community is so fortunate. Despite the extensive knowledge we have that these sites are dangerous for our communities and ought to be cleaned up quickly, they are not getting the necessary funding and the polluters are getting away without contributing to the cost of cleanup. At least 63 of the Superfund sites that have been put on the priority list for cleanup are not getting the money they need to. Many of these are sites like East Omaha where the community does not have the ability to fight itself to keep out polluters or to make the government clean up the pollution. So until the government decides to make these sites a priority, the community - and families like Elam's - suffers because they cannot afford to move or in many cases don't enough know about the dangers around them.

I fight for environmental justice because I believe that a lack of income should not dictate whether industry or the government has the right to threaten public health. I believe

there are steps that we can take - both locally and federally - which can make a difference. As a State Senator, I was able to get signed into law regulations on environmental justice. California was the first state in the nation to have such a law. Federally, I have partnered with Rep. Udall on the Environmental Justice Act - a similar initiative to California state law. We first introduced this legislation in 2003 and have since been working to require Federal agencies to consider environmental justice concerns in all their activities. I am also working to make sure that those agencies already required to consider environmental justice impacts of their regulations are abiding by the law.

In 2003, I requested that the General Accounting Office, Congress' investigative branch, to look at whether the Environmental Protection Agency - the agency in charge of protecting public health from environmental hazards - has really been considering the impacts of its air regulations on underserved communities. This report will be out in the next two months, and I am frustrated by what I anticipate we will hear - which is that so long as there is a decrease in pollution nationally local impacts don't matter. That is wrong. Local impacts do matter - they impact all of our health. If this is indeed the conclusion of this report you can guarantee I'll fight even harder to make sure that this problem is addressed.

Sometimes the knowledge of what is occurring is enough to make a positive change. As a result of a report that I released two years ago with help from Congressman Waxman, the 17 gravel pits and mining operations in my district and similar operations elsewhere in Southern California now have stronger restrictions on how much they can impact the air quality in the community. These new regulations, which become enforceable this July, will protect the neighborhoods in Azusa, Duarte, and Irwindale from the dust and fine particulate matter from these operations and will help protect the health of the workers.

I have also introduced legislation to protect our communities' water supply from contamination. For the 3rd straight year the Department of Defense is coming to Congress asking that it be exempted from water quality and environmental regulations. The Department of Defense is seeking to put perchlorate - or rocket fuel - into our water supplies at will. Perchlorate is known to impact the ability of the thyroid to regulate development in children and high levels of perchlorate are now being found in breast milk, lettuce and even wheat. The health of our environment, the health of our communities, and the health of our families is a priority for me.

As a public servant, one of my goals is to make sure that our environment is protected, restored and most importantly, safe for our families. I believe that, as a public servant, I must serve as a role model, especially to the young women who dream of a career in politics. When I was granted the John F. Kennedy Profiles In Courage Award in 1999 for my environmental justice work, I became the first woman in history to win that honor. I owe part of that honor to the work done by two of my heroes - Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez. They successfully worked to protect the health of farmworkers from pesticides like DDT. Their work paved the way for my efforts and the efforts of many others to continue fighting. These great humanitarians and social justice leaders remind us that

our struggles, whether bettering the lives of farm workers, ensuring environments free of industrial chemicals, or simply guaranteeing neighborhood parks in minority and low-income communities, are basic human rights that must be fought for.

I am grateful to serve as the Democratic Chair of the Women's Caucus, the Ranking Democrat on the Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Environment and Hazardous Materials, and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus' Task Force on Health in Congress because I can focus on public health and the environment. As I serve in each of these roles, I try to remember the lessons Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta taught me every day to resolve the injustices that plague all our communities. I know that I face many obstacles in this fight.

This administration has proposed eliminating programs that are crucial to development in the communities I represent. The Community Development Block Grant program is one of HUD's oldest programs. It helps to develop viable urban communities by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment, and by expanding economic opportunities, principally for low- and moderate-income persons. The Community Development Block Grant program provides critical funding for public safety, affordable housing, and economic growth initiatives for cities, counties and Native American communities. The district I represent strongly opposes these cuts.

I have heard from the Los Angeles County Community Development Commission, the League of California Cities, the Southern California Association of Nonprofit Housing, the mayors of major cities in California, and the Los Angeles City and County Native American Indian Commission and all of them strongly oppose the Republican budget proposal to cut funding for the Community Development Block Grant program. My own city of Rosemead has used this money to provide residential rehabilitation assistance to over 100 elderly and disabled households and to test 50 low income homes for lead paint contamination.

I have urged my colleagues to enact a budget package that contains sufficient funding for community development that helps the underserved neighborhoods throughout the country. I support new developments very strongly but I am always wary that they benefit the needs of the community and that they keep the health of the environment in mind. I will continue to work toward justice in these areas. And I hope you all will continue to work with me. Thank you.