

Article No. 6

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A New Environmental Justice Element

In compliance with Senate Bill 1000 (2016), the County is adding an Environmental Justice Element to the General Plan to provide objectives and policies to promote civic engagement, prioritize improvements and reduce health risks for disadvantaged communities. Regrettably, the new element seems inadequate to the task of improving living conditions in communities with deteriorating infrastructure and multiple indicators of concentrated poverty and poor health.

In 2011, Governor Brown signed into law Senate Bill 244, which required counties to evaluate the potable water, wastewater, storm drainage and structural fire protection deficiencies for “legacy” communities that met the definition of disadvantaged unincorporated communities. (A legacy community is at least 50 years old. A disadvantaged unincorporated community is a group of ten or more homes inhabited by families whose household incomes average less than 80% of the state average.)

In a 2013 report entitled *California Unincorporated: Mapping Disadvantaged Communities in the San Joaquin Valley*, Policylink, a national research institute, observed that many communities in the San Joaquin Valley rank lowest in the nation with respect to health, education and income. Disadvantaged communities often lack the basic features of healthy neighborhoods, including safe drinking water, sewer systems, sidewalks, streetlights, parks and essential services such as public transportation and healthcare.

The County missed the 2015 deadline to comply with SB 244. A suit filed by county residents forced compliance, and in late 2020 the County added a section to the General Plan describing structural deficiencies in 36 communities, examples being Tranquillity and Burrel.

SB 1000 (2016) now requires the County to focus on the needs of such communities by adding an environmental justice element to the General Plan that will include objectives and policies to (1) reduce health risks in

disadvantaged communities, including exposure to poor air quality, (2) promote public facilities, food access and physical activity, (3) promote engagement in civic affairs and (4) prioritize improvements and programs that address the needs of disadvantaged communities.

The policies of the new element are summarized below. The question is whether they address the strategies needed to overcome decades of indifference, disinvestment and socioeconomic inequity.

- ♦ To ensure that new urban development does not disproportionately burden disadvantaged communities, the County will (1) require that new sensitive land uses (such a residential uses) be located an appropriate distance from major transportation corridors, (2) require mitigation of potential adverse health and safety impacts when establishing sensitive land uses near heavy industrial uses and agricultural operations and (3) encourage commercial developments to reduce diesel emissions through the use of the latest technologies.
- ♦ To promote physical activity in disadvantaged communities, the County will (1) encourage walking and bicycling by placing neighborhood services and recreational facilities within comfortable walking or biking distance from residential areas, (2) collaborate with community services districts to develop public infrastructure that promotes outdoor physical activity, (3) collaborate with local school districts to develop safe and walkable routes to schools and (4) encourage new development to provide bicycle parking racks on-site.
- ♦ To improve access to healthy foods, health services and resources that enhance the quality of life in disadvantaged communities, the County will (1) promote locating health care facilities in places that are easily accessible by residents, (2) encourage the establishment of farmer’s markets, mobile health food vendors and healthy food establishments and (3) raise awareness about healthy eating habits and food choices.
- ♦ To strengthen public participation in the decision-making process, the County will ensure that residents of are provided an opportunity to participate in decisions that may have an adverse impact to their health.