

San Diego County Democratic Party

Central Committee Meeting July 17, 2018

Agenda Item 21: Parisa Ijadi-Maghsoodi re: Safeguard Our Back Country's Unintended Impact on Affordable Housing and Communities of Color

In San Diego this November, zoning and land use initiatives presented to voters as environmental protection efforts will give local residents the legal right to exclude from their communities people of color and low-income families, exacerbating the region's racial segregation and income inequality. These zoning policies are the redlining of our era.

Current Levels of Racial Segregation:

Segregation levels today mirror those that existed in the 1960s. Income inequality is worsening. The number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods has almost doubled since 2000, with African American and Hispanic families disproportionately impacted. In 2016, the Obama Administration identified San Diego as one of the nation's most highly segregated metropolitan areas because of its high concentration of Section 8 tenants living in high-poverty, low-income neighborhoods. In California, 60 percent of African Americans are without home ownership, compared to 28 percent of whites. Across high-cost areas of California, including San Diego, approximately 90 percent of African Americans reside in high cost and often substandard rental units.

Historical Context – How Zoning and Land Use Facilitated Racial Segregation:

Over the past century, the federal government legitimized and subsidized racial segregation through zoning and land use policies leading to deep and lasting racial segregation. Beginning in the 1920s, the Harding Administration encouraged localities to implement a model of zoning that created white single-family districts that excluded people of color. The segregationist zoning model, which proved to be effective nationwide, required high minimum square footage homes, large setbacks, and low-density which increased the cost of development. Through redlining, the Roosevelt administration used tax dollars to create race-based zoning maps so that the Federal Housing Administration could issue low-interest home loans to only white families and private contractors to construct white-only subdivisions.

Private racial covenants prohibited white homeowners from selling their homes to African Americans (enforced by courts until 1948). Unable to access home loans, African Americans entered into home sales contracts which required 15 to 20 years of inflated monthly payments (requiring multiple jobs and additional tenants, giving rise to "overcrowding" allegations), unjust evictions with no accrued equity, and transfer of title only upon full and final payment.

By the 1950s, racially discriminatory government policy reversals should have paved the way for integration. But white communities prevented integration by adopting facially neutral, but racially motivated, anti-density zoning ordinances, all under the guise of protecting the environment, and promoting the health and protecting the safety of the community.

By 1978, threatened by a growing minority presence, racial integration, and forced public school busing, white homeowners passed Proposition 13 which severely cut social services vital to low-income families and communities of color, and provided tax cuts to existing homeowners (beneficiaries of federally subsidized whites-only home loans and redlining) while forcing new homeowners to pay more for similarly situated property. After it passed, its proponents spearheaded the reversal of racial integration in the form of cross-district school busing.

How Today's Zoning Measures Exacerbate Racial Segregation:

Today, instead of explicitly discriminatory language, zoning ordinances use code to reflect underlying racial and class-based discriminatory sentiment. "Urban" and "multi-family housing," once descriptive terms for a location and a type of home, now serve as code words for communities of color, who disproportionately live in cities and multi-family housing as a direct result of the government-sponsored legitimization and subsidization of racial segregation.

Extensive studies (490 California cities and counties, and 1,000 jurisdictions across 25 metropolitan areas) demonstrate that anti-density zoning initiatives disproportionately impact low-income families and people of color, significantly dilute their votes, contribute to racial segregation, significantly displace new housing construction, drive up the costs of housing in adjacent uncontrolled areas, and burden all other than existing homeowners.

Environmental Protection as a Guise for Exclusion:

Citing environmental concerns (water quality, air quality, etc.) and quality of life as a defense to the development of housing in communities has become code for anti-density exclusionary zoning, with its underlying racial and classist sentiments. This is despite the fact that toxic waste and pollution sites are more likely to be in communities of color than in white communities, and the federal government continues to impose lower penalties against corporations that violate environmental laws in communities of color than in white communities.

Since the 1990s, "urban containment" zoning measures have been adopted across the nation, with dozens appearing in California, including the nation's most stringent voter-approval zoning policy (SOAR), which has resulted in increased land value disparities, a decrease in economic mobility, and adverse environmental impacts, from groundwater pumping, pesticides, and fertilizer applications, due to more a change towards more intensive agriculture use to offset the land value change.

San Diego's Zoning and Land Use Initiatives:

In San Diego this November, zoning and land use initiatives presented to voters as environmental protection efforts will give local residents the legal right to exclude from their communities people of color and low-income families, exacerbating the region's racial segregation and income inequality. These zoning policies are the redlining of our era.

These initiatives' underlying racial and class-based discriminatory sentiment is evident from their exclusionary language (protect the "unique character" and residents' "quality of life," protect "golf courses" which "are valuable assets that promote the well-being of all citizens" in [the City-specific initiative](#); protect "quality of life," "property rights are at stake," and "alter the character" in [the County initiative](#)), but also from the type of housing that is exempt from voter approval—single-family homes, minimum lot sizes of 2.5 acres, and second dwelling units for existing property owners.

These initiatives' housing exemptions closely reflect the federal model of zoning that created segregated, white single-family districts during the era of redlining and racial covenants. But most striking in similarity to the decades-old federal segregationist model is these initiatives' exclusion of multi-family units and high-density housing. A majority of voters must approve affordable housing projects under the county initiative, unless the Board of Supervisors not only makes a determination that an amendment to the General Plan is necessary to comply with state or federal law, but also makes three separate specific legal findings and provides substantial evidence upon which to support each finding. A similarly high bar is included in the city-specific initiative, in effect mandating the majority of voter to approve any proposed affordable housing development.

These zoning initiatives disguised as environmental protection efforts will exacerbate racial segregation and increase income equality, resulting in significantly worse outcomes for low-income families and communities of color. They are this era's form of redlining.