Martinez Wins APA Award for Promotion of Environmental Justice in National City

Josh Stephens on Jun 9, 2019

True to its patriotic name and to its location a few miles north of the United States-Mexico border, National City is the picture of diversity as a majority-minority city. Over 60 percent of the population is Hispanic, with significant representation from many other ethnicities, and nearly half are foreign-born. It is also a poor city, especially in contrast with its counterparts like Del Mar and Encinitas in northern end of coastal San Diego County.

National City is also Ground Zero for concerns about pollution and environmental justice. Despite abundant sea breezes, National City includes what critics say is a toxic mix of small industries, located dangerously close to residential areas. In National City, the dangers of local pollution are coupled with a population that is not necessarily politically savvy, leading to a cycle of pollution and endangerment. It is this cycle that activist and planner Carolina Martinez, policy director at Environmental Health Coalition, is trying to break – with considerable success.

Martinez, in conjunction with Paradise Creek Partnership, received one of five 2019 Excellence Awards from the American Planning Association for their advocacy of the Paradise Creek housing development, a 201-unit affordable complex built on a remediated brownfield in Old Town National City. According to APA, Martinez’s work “demonstrates community-based planning at its best, with residents working together to create the community they want to live in.” CP&DR’s Josh Stephens spoke with Martinez about this project and planners’ obligation to promote environmental justice.

What challenges did you and the Paradise Creek project face in National City?

National City is one of San Diego County’s oldest cities, and the west side of National City is one of the lowest-income communities in San Diego County. It’s mainly an immigrant community of recent arrivals. Most of the population speaks Spanish.

The community was largely a residential community, but back in the 1960s, the city initiated a process of disinvestment that allowed auto body shops and industrial uses to come in and take over residential land uses. Fast-forward to 2010, you have a land use pattern that mixes industry with homes and is impacting the health of the community. You have more kids going to the hospital due to asthma complications.

Environmental Health Coalition started working with the community back in 2005. At the time, the city wanted to bring in high rise buildings and redevelop the area, but not with a community vision in mind. We worked with the community to create a vision that reflected their priorities. We conducted a community survey in 2006. One of the things that came out of the survey was the need for affordable housing and the need to address land use incompatibilities and in general improve quality of life of the neighborhood.
A The community worked on the priorities outlined by the survey from 2006 to 2010, and they were approved via the Westside Specific Plan. That plan includes affordable housing projects, policies to address the land use incompatibility, and other priorities that are important to the community like not building new housing next to the freeway.

This was a vision that was approved in 2010. At that point, the community initiated the process of implementation and advocate for those priorities. The affordable housing project, which is the project APA recognized, was part of that vision.

What do you feel like you did that was effective?

I came to the project in 2010 when the community vision was approved. My role was to use my technical skills as an urban planner and ensure that the community’s vision was reflected in the implementation.

I serve kind of as a bridge between two worlds. The urban planning world is almost like a foreign language and disconnected from the public in a very intentional way. That is something we need to recognize: urban planning is structured in a way that is not accessible to the general public.

My role, with the support of the EHC team, was to do the opposite – to ensure that the community knew what was going on and understood exactly how the process was evolving, and to ensure that we all were speaking with the community’s vision in mind. I had to provide information in a way that was accessible to the community, I translated the planning language. I had to review the contracts and ensure that everything was OK. I had to look at clean up documents because the project included a remediation process, which we had to review. We had to engage with city staff and push back on their traditional ways of “engaging” with the community and ensure meetings were set up in a way that was comfortable for residents to provide feedback.

What do you feel is nationally significant about this project? Why do you feel it got APA’s attention?

It demonstrates that community-driven planning produces the most innovative solutions. I would dare to say that, as an urban planner, we don’t have the solutions. The people at the front lines of the issue every day have the solutions. As an urban planner, it’s my responsibility to provide technical support to advance those solutions.

How well is California as a state addressing environmental justice?

The state of California is undergoing a housing crisis, but we’re also undergoing a climate crisis and an air quality crisis. In the environmental justice community, all of that intersects, and none of it takes top priority. If we want to solve housing, it cannot be at the cost of air quality or exposure to hazardous materials, or exposure to diesel.

For example, there is a lot of talk about constructing affordable housing next to freeways. We strongly believe that that’s not the solution, because you end up exposing people to a lot of pollution – people who are already vulnerable. We believe that environmental justice communities have the best ideas for how to address the climate crisis and the housing crisis, because it is an intersection of both issues.

As a result of the work in National City, which advanced the first Environmental Justice Element in the General Plan, the California Environmental Justice Alliance and the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice led the effort to include environmental justice in California’s General Plan Guidelines. Cities are challenged by what that means, but ultimately the challenge shouldn’t be an excuse. There is a lot of opportunity for real solutions. Some are easy, and some are complex.
What advice do you have for other planners working at the intersection of advocacy and municipal planning?

The solutions are in the community-driven process. We have created a list of what community-driven planning includes. That list includes professional interpretation, childcare and food at meetings, and culturally relevant content. This process should build community members’ self-awareness and confidence, build genuine relationships, and provide real solutions. Those are themes and processes that allow for real, community-driven planning.

We have a training program for residents called SALTA – Salud Ambiental Lideres Tomando Accion – Environmental Health, Leaders Taking Action. It is an interactive leadership development curriculum that provides community leaders with skill-building training in community organizing. It provides community members with the opportunity to understand the planning process. Who is your mayor? Who are the council members? What are their goals? How are you able to influence the planning process? Why is it important to engage in the planning process? It is unfortunate, but the general public doesn’t know that it is at the local level where they can have the most influence.

What is your next project or outreach campaign that you’re working on?

In National City we are going to continue to implement the phase-out of industrial uses in the community. As part of the housing project, there is an open space. We want to make sure that there is a community garden. Those are two priorities in National City.

On my end, I’m working at the regional and state level on transportation and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. We did a report that was published last year that looked at the City of San Diego’s climate action plan implementation and how equitable it’s been. We identified that there hasn’t been a lot of progress.

San Diego is a mirror of what’s going on at the state level. The state is not reducing its greenhouse gases. We’re also able to uplift that mass public transportation is a solution to reducing greenhouse gases in the state, region, and at the local level in San Diego, because 50% of greenhouse gases are coming from transportation. The San Diego region is engaging in a ballot measure where voters in Nov. 2020 will be asked to support the funding of a more efficient mass transit system.

What is your vision for planning?
It’s really important for urban planners to realize we don’t have the solutions. Really, our job is to bring the people needed at the table to create innovative solutions. We don’t have it. City planners don’t have it. Council members don’t have it. It’s the communities that have the solutions.

A mother whose kid has asthma and is having asthma complications doesn’t get challenged by the idea of “nonconforming uses or a grandfathering clause.” To her what’s most important is that her kid doesn’t have to deal with asthma complications anymore. She will do anything to address that. And that means changing the policy. “What do you mean, my kid needs to be sick?” She will prioritize it and do anything she can do to ensure that her kid is healthy.

For an urban planner whose kid isn’t sick, it’s not a priority, and they will keep doing business as usual. That’s how we keep the status quo. The only time we change the status quo is when we engage the people who are dealing with the issues directly.