Commentary: Smoke from the Navy ship fire is another assault on National City. Our community deserves better.

Emergency crews responded to the scene of a fire aboard the USS Bonhomme Richard on Sunday, July 12, 2020 in San Diego, CA. (Sam Hodgson/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By MARGARET AVALOS GODSHALK

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Sunday morning as we were working in the yard, my son noticed a San Diego Fire-Rescue Department helicopter circling the area above the naval base just two miles from our house. A large plume of black smoke was traveling eastward into National City, the result of an explosion aboard a ship undergoing repairs there. The air filled with acrid odors, neighbors complained of headaches, and those with asthma were having trouble breathing.

My family called asking if any information about air quality and safety had been released. The agency responsible for air quality didn’t have any answers. We did receive an advisory recommending we stay indoors with the windows shut. It was over 90 degrees and most of those in our neighborhood do not have air conditioning.

The fire is still burning. We are told it will last for several more days. This incident further impacts residents who are already facing the challenges of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

My family and I and our neighbors live in Old Town National City. My great-grandmother arrived here with her daughters and granddaughters, including my mom, about 1915. My grandmother raised her family here on Cleveland Avenue, my mother raised her family here, and I have raised my family here as well.

The neighborhood now is completely different than it was when I was growing up. Then there was a lively community of family and friends (mostly Mexican immigrants), two restaurants, three “corner stores,” and, yes, a couple of matanzas or slaughterhouses.

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As a kid, I saw Interstate 5 cut our part of the neighborhood away from the rest of Old Town. Now the houses, stores and restaurants are gone, purchased by steel manufacturers, boat repair companies, and a moving and storage company, among others. For a while, a junkyard was down the block where the railroad roundhouse once stood. Only six houses remain.

Across the interstate, many of the houses have disappeared, and in their place are cinder block warehouse structures housing many commercial/industrial uses, predominantly car repair shops. These structures were built right up against the next property, no setback, so the residents of the remaining houses often look out their windows onto a cinder block wall.

I believe the hope was that, if you build it, they will leave. If the neighborhoods were flooded with commercial shops, built right up to their houses, the residents would eventually leave. But we have not. So the toxic fumes of chemicals and paints permeate the neighborhoods, and our residents become ill as a result.
I taught at our neighborhood school, Kimball School, for 25 years. I am now retired but volunteer, running an environmental club there, The Egret Club, for grades three through six. In my classroom I witness firsthand how air quality affects our children’s health — negatively impacting school performance, prohibiting their participation in physical activities, contributing to absenteeism. Asthma is a debilitating disease — one from which a child never recovers.

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National City is among the poorest cities in San Diego County. It is a community of color with significant challenges including language barriers, insufficient access to reliable transportation and healthy food, and high exposure to pollutants. Twenty percent of residents live below the federal poverty line and 25.8 % of the population has less than a high school education. Ninety percent are people of color and 21% are under the age of 18.
As my community struggles with the coronavirus pandemic, we are at a disadvantage. Issues of density, being part of the essential workforce, poverty and environmental racism all work to make us some of the most vulnerable. But I work with kids, so I remain hopeful, because they are fiercely in favor of justice — and they will join, and I know eventually lead, the fight for environmental justice.

Our community has survived many assaults over the decades. Families have been displaced, others exposed to toxins in the home and in the air. To address all of these challenges, the community came together and helped develop the Westside Specific Plan in 2010 to improve the quality of life for our residents. The plan was historic because it addressed the systemic racism inherent in the discriminatory land use that allowed industries to be sited next to homes and schools. The neighborhood has been rezoned to ensure that families are protected and industries have an appropriate place to locate. The plan increased affordable housing and green space and was embraced.

Now the city is developing a plan that would make changes to parts of Old Town that will impact the community through increased density near freeways. The plans will likely increase housing costs and reduce affordability.

Once again the community needs to come together to guide the city in its planning. The community must be involved. The city has to show that it is interested in what the residents want, not just in ticking off a “community outreach” box. The discussion about the Transit Oriented Development Overlay must be real, not virtual in a Zoom-type meeting. Our city is now in another shutdown. The city should wait until residents can come together to hear about the plans and voice their concerns and ideas.
City planning guided by the dreams and vision of the community can lead to a National City that includes and respects its residents now and into the future. That is my hope.

**Avalos Godshalk** is a retired school teacher and president of the Environmental Health Coalition who lives in Old Town National City.