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Mitigating Negative Consequences of New Urban Growth in Disadvantaged Communities

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Introduction

Recent California legislation and regional planning efforts aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by promoting infill housing—often in transit-rich areas. In the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California, these areas are often designated as Priority Development Areas (PDAs). However, such urban developments could have unintended negative consequences if planned in already distressed, underserved communities. These disadvantaged communities (DACs) can include those with limited access to parks, libraries, and roads; poor quality public transit, schools, and air; and limited access to healthy food. Indeed, recent CSU SB1-funded research found that PDAs are twice as likely as other urban areas to be disadvantaged. Other studies have reached similar conclusions. Without careful planning, efforts to reduce emissions could unintentionally deepen existing inequities. Thus, it becomes critical to identify which plans, policies, strategies, and funding (henceforth, called tools) are available to mitigate these impacts and which additional tools are needed.

Study Methods

Mathur and Ferrell (2024) measured community disadvantage across several dimensions, including socio-economic, educational, environmental, and transportation factors. Through Geographic Information Systems (GIS) maps, this research showed the location of DACs. Building on the findings of Mathur and Ferrell (2024), this research uses document and literature review and stakeholder interviews to conducts an in-depth examination of four DACs from among the top four jurisdictions each from the San Francisco Bay Area (Oakland, Fairfield, Pittsburg, and unincorporated Contra Costa County) and Southern California (unincorporated San Bernardino County, unincorporated Los Angeles (LA) County, unincorporated Riverside County, and the City of Los Angeles) regions where a large proportion of new urban growth is planned within DACs. These four DACs include West Oakland (WO) and North Richmond (NR) in the San Francisco Bay Area and Bloomington and Florence-Firestone (F-F) in Southern California.

Many plans and policies exist but, too often, they fail to protect disadvantaged communities from the negative impacts of new development.

Findings

- Except for Bloomington, which has faced major environmental pollution since the introduction of warehousing and trucking there in the last 2–3 decades, the other three case study communities have long legacies as DACs.
- Contrary to the popular notion that DACs are in inner-city areas of large cities, except for WO, three case study DACs are in unincorporated counties. DACs in unincorporated areas usually comprise a small portion of the unincorporated county area and their county board of supervisors' district, putting them at a political disadvantage where they often lack political champions. Furthermore, they often do not receive close, focused attention from county government departments, which are often resource-challenged, or are usually not equipped to provide urban-level services. From a policy perspective, too, being a small part of an unincorporated county area puts DACs at a disadvantage, as county-wide policies, not those tailored to DACs, are usually adopted and implemented.
- While several tools exist to mitigate disadvantage, their implementation or efficacy at the DAC-level is sparse.
- While all the case study DACs are identified for future growth due to their designation as PDAs in the regional plans, the regional tools seem to have little impact at the DAC level.

Policy/Practice Recommendations

- Align local development with community needs: County governments view DACs as locations to meet their county-wide objectives, such as housing (in F-F) and economic development through warehouses (in Bloomington). Often, these objectives do not align with the DACs' needs or, in Bloomington's case, further worsen the environmental disadvantage. Through regulation and incentives, state and regional agencies should require local governments to mitigate the disadvantages of DACs actively.
- Increase state and federal funding: All the case study DACs exist in fiscally constrained jurisdictions, which need significant financial support from state and federal governments to effectively address the substantial disadvantages impacting these communities.
- Ensure fair community benefits from new development: DAC residents usually gain very little from new development. In fact, they could be left more disadvantaged than before. Therefore, as the DACs receive new development, local governments should facilitate fair and effective community benefit agreements aligned with the communities' needs.
- Require local governments to proactively engage community-based organizations: Community-based organizations know the on-the-ground conditions well and are the primary voices of the low-income, minority, marginalized communities living in the DACs. Therefore, local governments should be required to proactively engage local CBOs in all aspects of planning, implementation, and monitoring.

About the Authors

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at https://transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2456

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