

# **FROM WASTED SPACES TO HEALTHY PLACES:**

## **Transforming Brownfields and Vacant Spaces in Sacramento**



Ubuntu Green  
Sacramento Housing Alliance  
Coalition on Regional Equity

November 2013

# **Brownfields and Vacant Spaces in Sacramento**

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## **Executive Summary**

Sacramento's environmental justice communities have long been plagued with vacant lots that are magnets for crime and illegal dumping. When coupled with the elimination of redevelopment agencies and the foreclosure crisis that has hit Sacramento especially hard, already struggling communities have become overwhelmed by abandoned buildings and uncared for vacant spaces. Furthermore, communities of color and low-income communities have been historically burdened with a disproportionate amount of unhealthy land uses, such as gas stations, chrome plating facilities, waste storage plants and other heavy polluting industrial activities. These problems have grown over time, as brownfields left behind by polluting land uses have created vacant spaces with limited redevelopment and reuse options along with hazardous contamination risks.

Community engagement on issues of land use has exposed extensive challenges with the concentration of vacant spaces in some neighborhoods and the urgent need for action. Creating change around this long-ignored aspect of community decay would have a significant impact on families struggling to live healthy lives in this environment. The Environmental Justice Initiative set out to develop a campaign that could create change around these issues.

The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign was initiated to address the prevalence of unhealthy land uses in communities of color and low-income communities, with a particular focus on Oak Park, South Sacramento, and Del Paso Heights. Through a robust and ongoing community engagement process, community challenges have been identified and strategies have been developed, with some already moving forward. This report lays out the recommendations that will begin addressing brownfields and vacant spaces in the Sacramento region and create a more equitable built environment in Sacramento.

## **From Wasted Spaces to Healthy Places: Transforming Brownfields and Vacant Spaces in Sacramento**

In every low-income urban neighborhood in Sacramento there are many places where it appears that no development has ever occurred. In many neighborhoods in Sacramento and other communities, these places are called “the fields.” Often overgrown with weeds and tall grass, the fields were attractive places for adventure-minded children. They play games in the fields and use them as shortcuts to faster travel through the neighborhood. Many of these spaces have remained vacant for decades.

While there are some fond memories of childhood adventures in the fields, these vacant spaces expose residents of the neighborhood to significant danger. They are often filled with furniture, junk appliances, construction debris, and other unsafe materials that are the end result of illegal dumping. Some residents have recounted the violence that occurs in these places. They are places where gangs initiate new members and threaten to kill and bury people who “snitched” in the fields. At night, people use the fields for prostitution, drinking, and drug use, leaving behind broken bottles, and used paraphernalia.

While crime is a more apparent problem associated with the fields, it is more difficult to understand the role that these vacant spaces play in other factors of equity and health. Vacant spaces are often the result of a historic pattern of disinvestment in communities of color and low-income communities. Spaces in communities that seem like they have always been vacant, have not been. Businesses previously existed on some of those fields in the past, but since have left and taken their jobs with them, often leaving behind the toxic remains of their industry. Some of these sites are called “brownfields,” which means that their redevelopment or reuse is complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.

Recent research suggests that the place where one lives can be a major predictor of important life outcomes such as health, academic and career success. Place matters because the quality of a neighborhood’s built environment, including the concentration of vacant spaces and brownfields compared to healthy land uses, is directly correlated with access to the economic, political, and social resources needed to thrive. Unfortunately, many residents in Sacramento live in communities that lack the investments of these key resources and that are overburdened with environmental hazards and safety risks. These are central issues of environmental justice.

Everyone deserves to live in a community where they can reach their full potential. Making that belief a reality for all communities in Sacramento is the purpose of the Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign.

Sacramento Environmental Justice Initiative Team  
(Ubuntu Green, Sacramento Housing Alliance, Coalition on Regional Equity)

# The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign

## The Environmental Justice Initiative

In 2010, Ubuntu Green, the Sacramento Housing Alliance, and the Coalition on Regional Equity developed the Environmental Justice Initiative. The Environmental Justice Initiative was founded to promote more equitable land use planning and development in communities of color and low-income communities in recognition of the environmental and health disparities between communities in the Sacramento region.<sup>1 2</sup> Inspired by the work of Ubuntu Green and the Coalition on Regional Equity, the Environmental Justice Initiative seeks to advance a healthy land use agenda in traditionally marginalized communities by mounting campaigns and community engagements to influence land use decision-making at the local and regional level. The Environmental Justice Initiative also seeks to inform residents about environmental health issues and address patterns of development and disinvestment that create these environmental health risks. Through the Environmental Justice Initiative, the capacity of the target neighborhoods to influence public policy, inform their public officials, and promote healthy development in their neighborhoods is strengthened.

The Environmental Justice Initiative was conceived in partnership with Ubuntu Green's Healthy Land Use Engagement Project<sup>3</sup>. The Healthy Land Use Engagement Project is a multi-year community engagement project focused on addressing environmental health and justice issues, healthy food access and transportation safety and access across eight different neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup> Data gathered as a result of the Healthy Land Use Engagement Project informed the development of the Brownfields<sup>5</sup> and Vacant Spaces Campaign.

With a focus on the North Sacramento community of Del Paso Heights and South Sacramento neighborhoods covered by the Healthy Land Use Engagement Project, the Initiative set out to address the negative health and environmental impacts of inequitable patterns of growth and disinvestment. These neighborhoods have limited public transit, crumbling infrastructure, little access to fresh food, many abandoned properties, multiple sources of environmental contamination, and limited economic opportunity. The Environmental Justice Initiative has sought to build the capacity of these neighborhoods to advocate for improved development and investment with a focus on improving the health of the residents and the environmental conditions of their community. The Environmental Justice Initiative supports communities by engaging in four activities: research and analysis, engagement and education, policy and

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<sup>1</sup> "Social Determinants of Health: Where You Live Matters."  
<http://www.reportingonhealth.org/resources/topics/social-determinants-health>

<sup>2</sup> Energy Justice Network, Environmental Justice/Environmental Racism. <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/>

<sup>3</sup> Ubuntu Green's Healthy Land Use Engagement Project. <http://www.ubuntuugreen.org/healthy-land-use-engagement>

<sup>4</sup> The eight neighborhoods in the South Sacramento area include Oak Park, Avondale, Glen Elder, Lemon Hill, The Avenues, West Tahoe Park, North and South Farms, and Fruitridge Manor.

<sup>5</sup> United States Environmental Protection Agency, Brownfields and Land Revitalization.  
<http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/overview/glossary.htm>

advocacy, and influencing comprehensive planning processes.

### **Prelude to a Campaign**

The Environmental Justice Initiative mounted its first campaign on unhealthy land use planning in response to a proposal from the Sacramento Natural Gas Storage Facility<sup>6</sup> to locate an underground natural gas storage facility under a traditionally African-American community in South Sacramento in 2008. Even before the well-publicized San Bruno natural gas pipeline explosion,<sup>7</sup> the community understood the risk of such a project and sought to protect their families from a similar fate. The residents' awareness of the danger was further heightened when an improper pipeline repair caused a natural gas explosion in the City of Rancho Cordova in Sacramento County.

The Environmental Justice Initiative team wanted to be of service to the community-based advocates engaged in the fight against the siting. The Coalition on Regional Equity worked to ensure that community voices were heard. The Coalition also initiated a community engagement campaign and coordinated efforts with Legal Services of Northern California to bring the legal fight to local decision-makers and the California Public Utilities Commission, which eventually voted to oppose the placement of the storage facility in the community.

In late 2010, the Environmental Justice Initiative expanded their work to North Sacramento. North Sacramento was prioritized because the Environmental Justice Initiative team recognized the high number of brownfields and vacant spaces in that area. Harmon Johnson Elementary School in Del Paso Heights had been targeted for relocation due to concerns about its proximity to a natural gas storage facility. The San Bruno gas pipeline explosion brought renewed concerns about the safety of these facilities throughout California. Initially, the school district trustees wanted to disperse the children to different schools throughout the Twin Rivers Unified School District. When the families found out about the plan, they fought back. They made their voices heard by local decision-makers and were able to get the school district to move all the children together to one nearby underutilized school site. The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign has been fortunate to be able to tap directly into the organic advocacy group that sprung up around the Harmon Johnson Elementary School closure.

The Sacramento Natural Gas Storage campaign was a significant moment in Sacramento that shed light on the land use concerns of other vulnerable communities and raised the issue of environmental justice in the region. The Coalition on Regional Equity and Ubuntu Green leveraged the opportunity created by the school siting issue in Del Paso Heights and other land use issues identified in Ubuntu Green's Healthy Land Use Engagement Project to develop a strong foundation for a second campaign.

Sacramento's environmental justice communities have long been home to unused lots spread

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<sup>6</sup> Walking On Gas. <http://www.walkingongas.com/meet-the-people/agenal/>

<sup>7</sup> Report of the Independent Review Panel for the San Bruno Explosion, Prepared for California Public Utilities Commission. <http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/NR/rdonlyres/85E17CDA-7CE2-4D2D-93BA-B95D25CF98B2/0/cpucfinalreportrevised62411.pdf>



throughout the neighborhoods. These underutilized spaces are magnets for crime and illegal dumping. When coupled with the foreclosure crisis that hit Sacramento very hard, already struggling communities have become over run with abandoned buildings and uncared for vacant lots. Further, communities of color and low-income communities have been burdened with a disproportionate amount of unhealthy land uses, such as gas stations, chrome plating facilities, and other heavy polluting industrial activities. The community's voice was clear and the Environmental Justice Initiative team determined that it was time to look deeper into the issue of brownfields and vacant spaces in Sacramento.

### **Associated Land Use Engagement Efforts**

#### *Healthy Land Use Engagement Project*

The Healthy Land Use Engagement Project was conceived with The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities Initiative<sup>8 9</sup> in mind. The goal of the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities is to make communities healthier places for residents. The project does this by improving employment opportunities, education, housing, neighborhood safety, unhealthy environmental conditions, access to healthy foods and more. Ubuntu Green's project in the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities, the Healthy Land Use Engagement Project, was the inspiration for the Environmental Justice Initiative.

Instituted in April of 2010, the Healthy Land Use Engagement Project was designed to strengthen the capacity of the residents and youth in Oak Park and South Sacramento to advocate for health promoting land use, transportation, food access, and community development policies. The goal of the project is to increase capacity of residents in South Sacramento to advocate for land use policies that affect their communities. The project also seeks to increase leadership development and capacity of youth in South Sacramento to advocate for land use policies that affect their communities through their participation in the Green Youth Leadership Team (G-Squad), as well as advocacy and leadership development trainings.

The project develops resident leaders that advocate before regional and local governmental land use policy authorities to support improved access to healthy food, smart growth, and transportation equity. They participated in policy plans such as the Sustainable Communities Strategy and the Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2035. As with the Environmental Justice Initiative, residents define which projects, regulatory, and policy changes need to be made in their neighborhoods by leveraging systems knowledge and planning, policy, and advocacy tools.

The Healthy Land Use Engagement Project also leverages regional, statewide, and national efforts and campaigns to learn from these entities regarding policies and efforts that can support or impact the project and other environmental justice communities, and to funnel the opinions and efforts of residents into these processes. This includes active participation in the Sacramento Regional Food System Collaborative, the Sacramento City Unified School District's Healthy Foods Task Force, Transportation for America's Equity Caucus, the California Equity Leaders

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<sup>8</sup> The California Endowment, Building Healthy Communities. <http://www.calendow.org/healthycommunities/>

<sup>9</sup> Sacramento Building Healthy Communities. <http://sacbhc.org/>



Network, and the Environmental Council of Sacramento.

### *Del Paso Heights Community Engagement*

As mentioned above, Del Paso Heights had already been the site of organic organizing around the Harmon Johnson Elementary School closure. To that end, the Environmental Justice Initiative began a series of community engagement meetings in the neighborhoods of Del Paso Heights and Noralto. In addition to the advocate parents, the Environmental Justice Initiative was able to connect with a teacher at the school that proved to be a great community resource. The Environmental Justice Initiative held the first meeting at the school in November of 2011. At that meeting the group of organizational representatives and school parents began an ongoing and dynamic discussion about the challenges that residents identified in the built environment.

The team learned quickly from the parents that their community faced a litany of challenges. They identified unsafe traffic corridors, blighted and crime-ridden apartment complexes, and vacant lots that attracted illegal dumping. Through the engagement meetings and walk audits, the Environmental Justice Initiative team learned that the community members had a clear and compelling vision of health in their community. They wanted sidewalks wide enough to walk safely with their children, access to inexpensive and healthy food, and parks that were not overrun by gangs, prostitution and violence. The feedback from these residents was a cornerstone in the development of the Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign and continues to inform the Environmental Justice Initiative.

### **Emergence of the Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign**

The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign was initiated in order to address the prevalence of unhealthy land uses in communities of color and low-income communities. It is the second campaign of the Environmental Justice Initiative. Through the Environmental Justice Initiative and the Healthy Land Use Engagement Project, Ubuntu Green engaged residents of Del Paso Heights, Oak Park, and South Sacramento and discovered that vacant lots and other abandoned properties were a serious concern throughout all the neighborhoods. In some areas, there was a prevalence of potentially harmful land uses next to recreational, educational, and residential locations.

The Campaign formally launched with a series of region-wide public forums. The first public forum focused on learning about the history of the issue and the second one included a follow-up visioning session to understand what types of development should replace brownfields and vacant spaces once abated. Later that same year, a third public forum was convened to focus on determining what actions must be undertaken to bring healthy land uses and development to these communities. Finally, a fourth public forum was held to discuss how to achieve target actions and policy changes.

Information contained in this paper for a call to action has been collected since the beginning of the Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign. It includes information learned from the public forums series, community engagement efforts, and other local land use campaigns, as well as data gathered from local, state, and federal agencies. This document also highlights examples of

community-based efforts to address brownfields and vacant spaces. Finally, actions and policy targets are presented to guide further discussion.

## **Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign – From Theory to Action: November 2011 – Present**

Since 2010, the Healthy Land Use Engagement Project and the Environmental Justice Initiative has worked to address brownfields and vacant spaces through several activities, beginning with engaging the residents of Del Paso Heights, Oak Park, and South Sacramento in a discussion of the unhealthy land uses in their community. The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign sponsored region-wide public forums to gather input on the issues. That input directly informed the research and other data collection conducted, leading to campaign recommendations that are at the end of this report.

### **February 2012 –Public Forum #1: Historical Scan of Brownfields and Vacant Lots**

The Environmental Justice Initiative hosted an initial public forum on the issue of brownfields and vacant lots on February 22, 2012 at the Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services Community Room in the South Sacramento community of Oak Park. The meeting brought together community members, local advocates, environmentalists, urban gardeners, academics, and County and Statewide government agencies that have been impacted by and have worked to address this problem. The purpose of this convening was to develop a strong foundation of information regarding known problem areas, historical attempts to address the issue, and ideas for solutions. This was an initial step in the development of a campaign around this issue in impacted communities.

The forum included a panel of land use experts from the Sacramento community, including Charles Ridenour of the Department of Toxic Substances Control, Amy Williams of Legal Services of Northern California, and Greg Chew of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments. The panel discussed their experiences and knowledge related to brownfields abatement.

As a knowledge building activity, the participants engaged in an environmental scan. The purpose of this exercise was to gather together knowledge on the issue from all the participants of the room. Participants identified major efforts regarding brownfields and vacant spaces that have been made at the community, local, state, and federal level over the past ten years. The group discussed which event was most successful in contributing to the remediation of brownfields and vacant lots and which events posed the biggest challenge. The community memory ranged from the military base closures that occurred before 1999 to specific sites that once were used but are now vacant. The group noted the success of urban agriculture and food distribution to local communities, the growing strength of neighborhood associations, and the community garden ordinance.

Among the most prominent challenges were the very recent dissolution of redevelopment agencies in California, the foreclosure crisis, and the economic downturn. Particularly, the loss of redevelopment agencies loomed large for participants. While not perfect, redevelopment was a successful tool for securing investment in Sacramento's struggling neighborhoods. Unfortunately, as the program was dismantled, very little consideration was given to how these

communities would secure future investment in infrastructure and development.<sup>10</sup>

During the final segment of the forum, participants were asked to share what they want to see happen with regards to brownfields and vacant spaces in the next five years. This served as an opportunity for participants to consider the possibilities of how current efforts, including the public forum, can positively affect change in the future. Responses were organized into three approaches, namely policy/regulatory, community-based, and fundraising. There was strong support for an urban agriculture ordinance, incentivizing infill development, and developing a community land trust.

This meeting was a great way to get to gather community knowledge about the brownfields and vacant spaces issue. The next step was to get the community to begin building a strong and clear vision of what a healthier community would look like.

### **May 2012 - Public Forum #2: Envisioning Possibilities for Brownfields and Vacant Lots**

The second public forum took place on Wednesday, May 23, 2012 at Belle Cooledge Library. The purpose of the meeting was for participants to imagine the possibilities for brownfields and vacant spaces in the Sacramento region, and for participants to identify different approaches to the issues via success stories and case studies.

The purpose of presenting the case studies was to generate ideas of what can be done in the Sacramento region. These case studies are discussed further in the 'Visioning the Future' section of this document.

After the case studies were presented, participants discussed what stood out most from each case study, identified key regional differences, resource differences, and similarities that exist between those areas and the whole Sacramento region. The participants discussed how the case studies highlighted the need for development incentives, building community support, and assessing community assets and needs. Community vision building emerged as a powerful theme in the discussion.

Next, participants discussed what they wanted to see done with a brownfields and vacant space sites post cleanup. They generated comprehensive list of community needs that included educational opportunities, jobs, access to healthy food, and recreation.

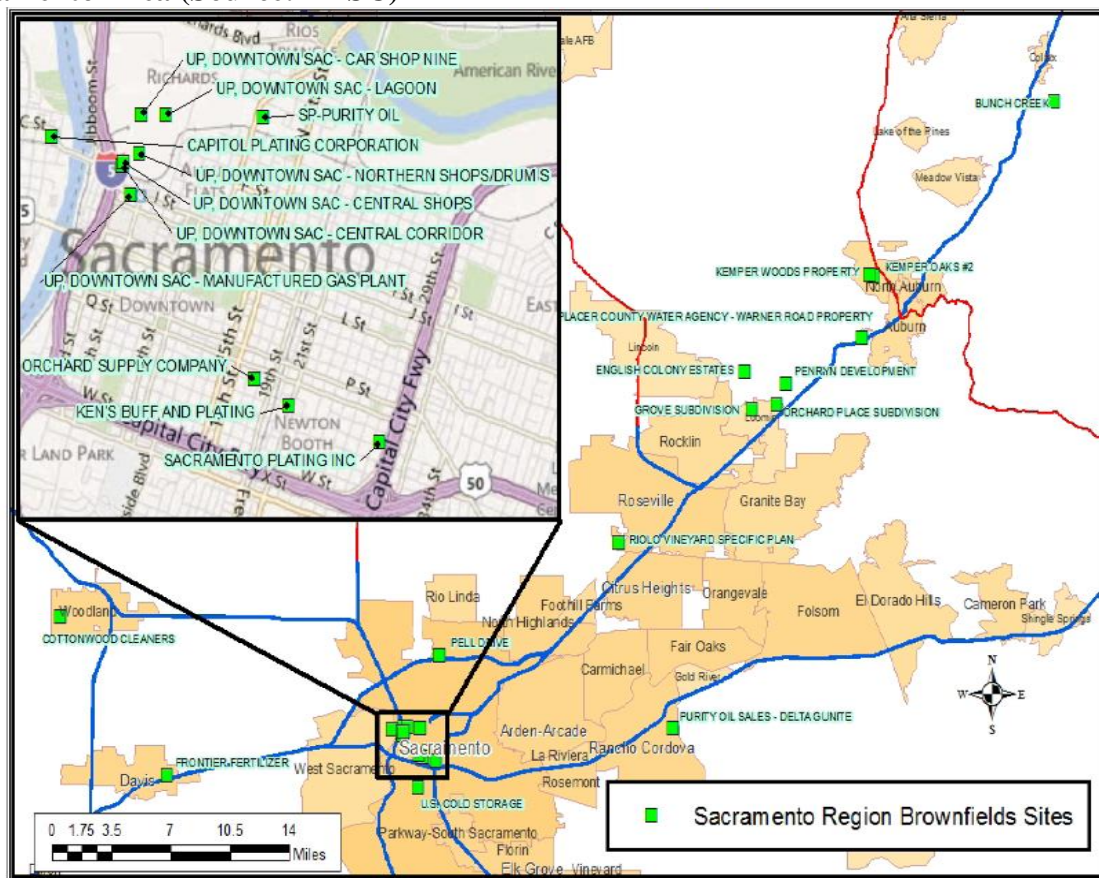
Campaign staff presented an overview of major findings from the February public forum. Two California Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) toxic source maps were presented to set context for the state of brownfields in the Sacramento region. The major areas currently mapped are areas with the most development interest, so are not near comprehensive enough for the Campaign. There are many brownfields and vacant spaces in Sacramento that are currently not mapped. A study conducted by the County of Sacramento's Business Environmental Resource Center in March of 2008, indicated there were

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<sup>10</sup> California Department of Finance, Redevelopment Agency Dissolution. <http://www.dof.ca.gov/redevelopment/>

at least 850 sites known or suspected of contamination, 525 of which met the United States Environmental Protection Agencies definition of a brownfields and 350 of these sites were tied to petroleum contamination. Of these sites nearly 200 were located along the Stockton, Florin, Broadway and Fruitridge corridors in South Sacramento, many others are suspected to be in North Sacramento.<sup>11</sup> The vast majority of these sites do not appear on the DTSC or other maps of toxic sites because of agreements made with landlords. Participants were introduced to the concept of Geographic Information System (GIS) map sharing and the possibility of sharing data among stakeholders and the community.<sup>12</sup>

**Map 1: Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) Brownfields Sites in the Greater Sacramento Area (Source: DTSC)**

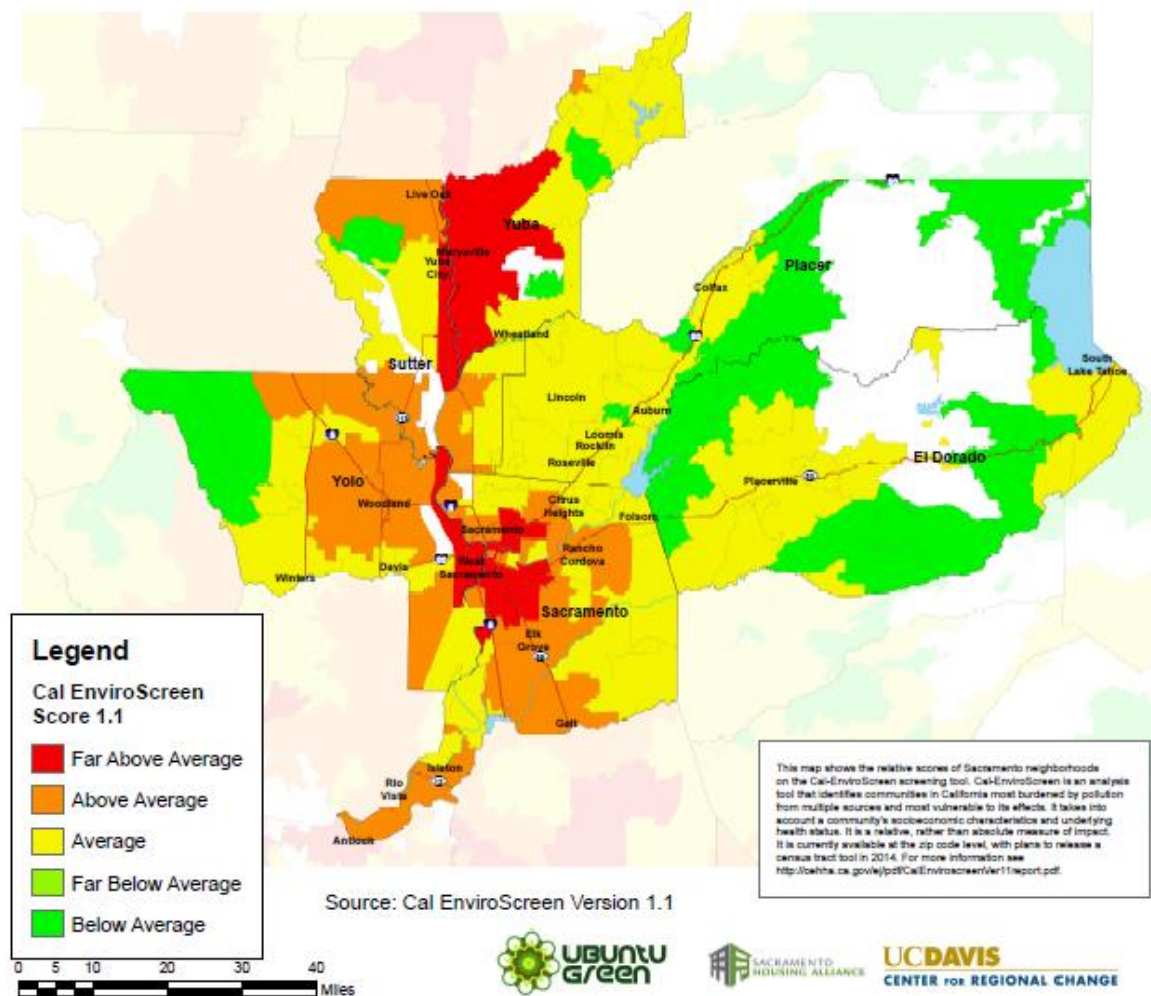


<sup>11</sup> Sacramento Brownfields Assessment Project USEPA Grant BF-96950401-0: Summary Report. Sacramento County Business Environmental Resource Center. March 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Ubuntu Green utilizes Google earth and GIS (short for Geographic Information System) to map problem areas and opportunities in the neighborhoods where organization is currently working. GIS sharing can help track and map brownfields and vacant spaces in the Sacramento area. Participants in attendance had various levels of experience with GIS, which ultimately maps the geo spatial environment in any given area. Ubuntu Green invited attendees to attend a meeting with Healthy City, a non-profit specializing in mapping and data gathering, on May 31, 2012. Participants were asked to think of additional layers for GIS maps. Some of the suggested layers included community gardens, sites where soil testing has occurred, and community amenities.

After the forum, the Environmental Justice Initiative team then developed a strategic partnership with the U.C. Davis Center for Regional Change, an organization dedicated to producing research to support the building of healthy, prosperous, sustainable, and equitable regions in California and beyond. Drawing on work done by the California Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Health Hazard Assessment (CalEnviroScreen)<sup>13</sup> and its own research, the U.C. Davis Center for Regional Change created a series of maps that illustrate the environmental health risk that existed in the Sacramento region, as compared to the rest of the state. Several zip codes in Sacramento fell within the top 10 or 20 percent of vulnerable communities in the state of California. The maps also illustrate the concentration of environmental hazards in South Sacramento and North Sacramento, including Del Paso Heights, and the relative levels of both environmental hazards (air pollution, toxic and hazardous waste sites, pesticides, and related factors) and social vulnerability (based on issues of income, language, education, health conditions, and others).

**Map 2: Cal-EnviroScreen Environmental Health Burden Screening Score, Normed to State**

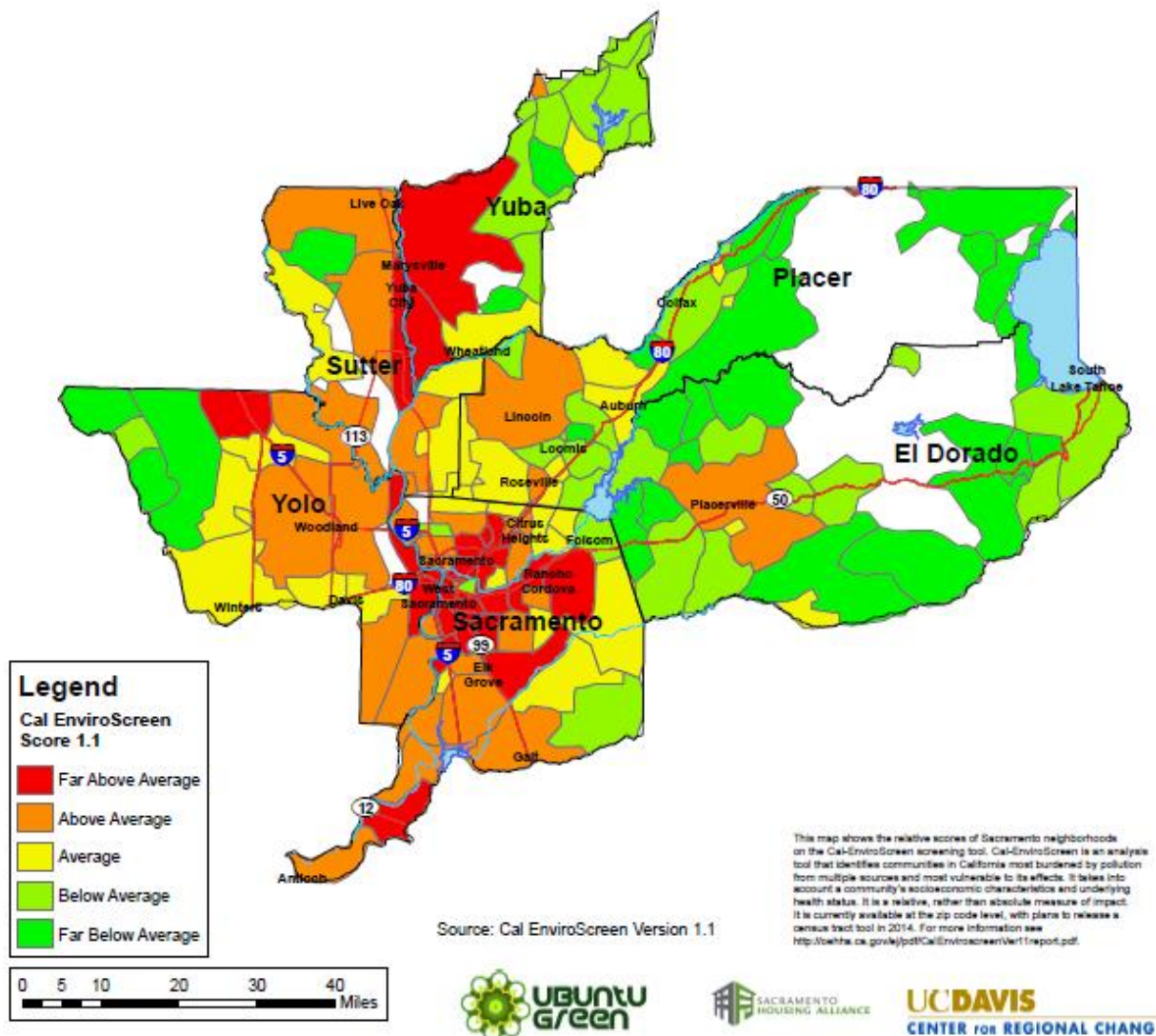


<sup>13</sup> Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool. <http://oehha.ca.gov/ej/ces042313.html>



Map 2 shows the neighborhoods that are far above the average for the six-county region (El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Placer, Yolo, and Yuba Counties) for the statewide CalEnviroScreen's combination of data on exposure to environmental hazards and social vulnerability. Map 3 shows the neighborhoods that are in the top 10% of all places when those same scores are computed at a regional, not statewide, scale.

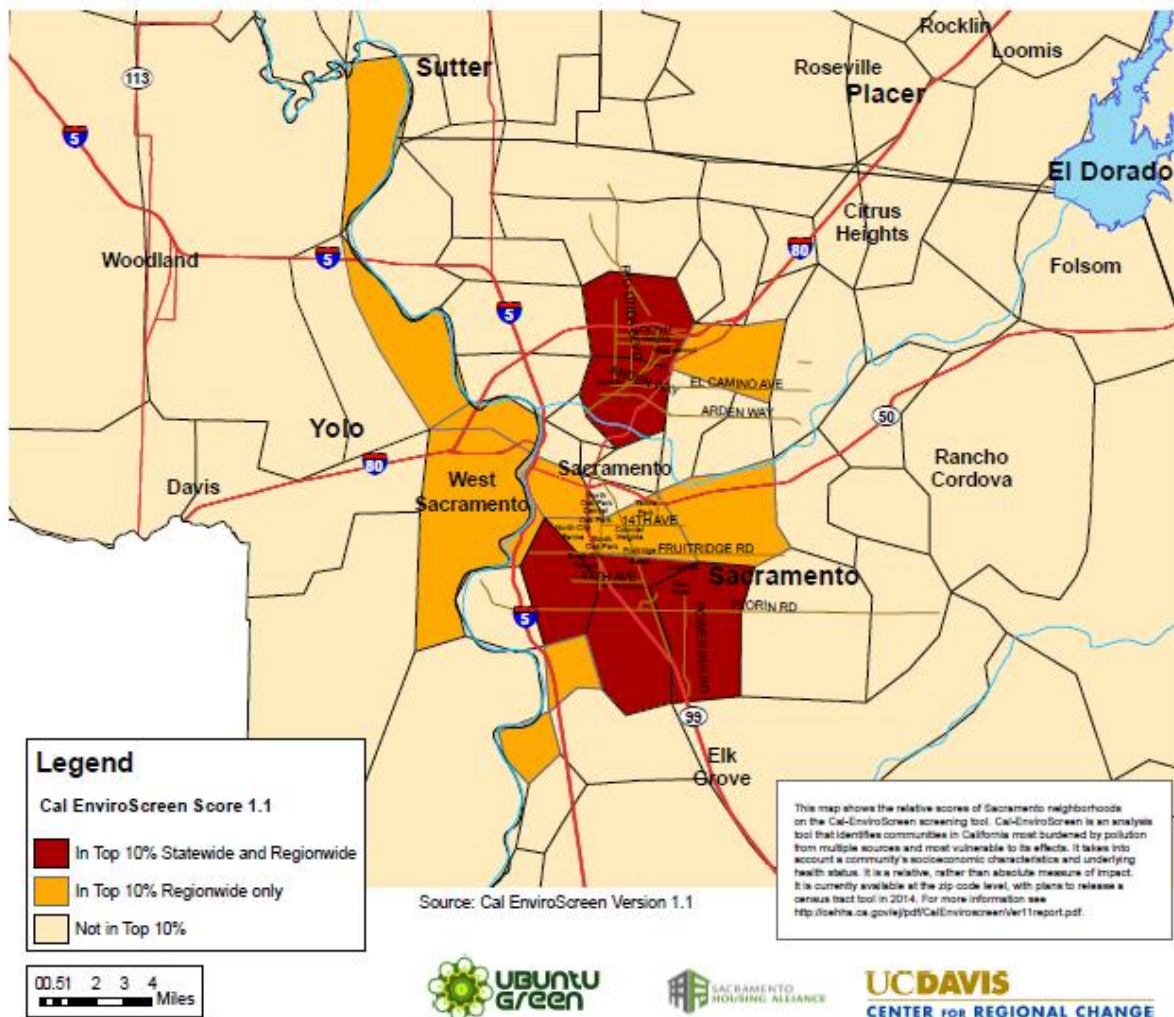
**Map 3: Cal-EnviroScreen Environmental Health Burden Screening Score, Normed to Sacramento Region**



Map 4 zooms in on the City of Sacramento and surrounding communities of Sacramento County with this elevated hazard and vulnerability. This map highlights communities at highest level of risk based on both statewide and regional scores. Note the inclusion of the neighborhoods of South Sacramento and Del Paso Heights.

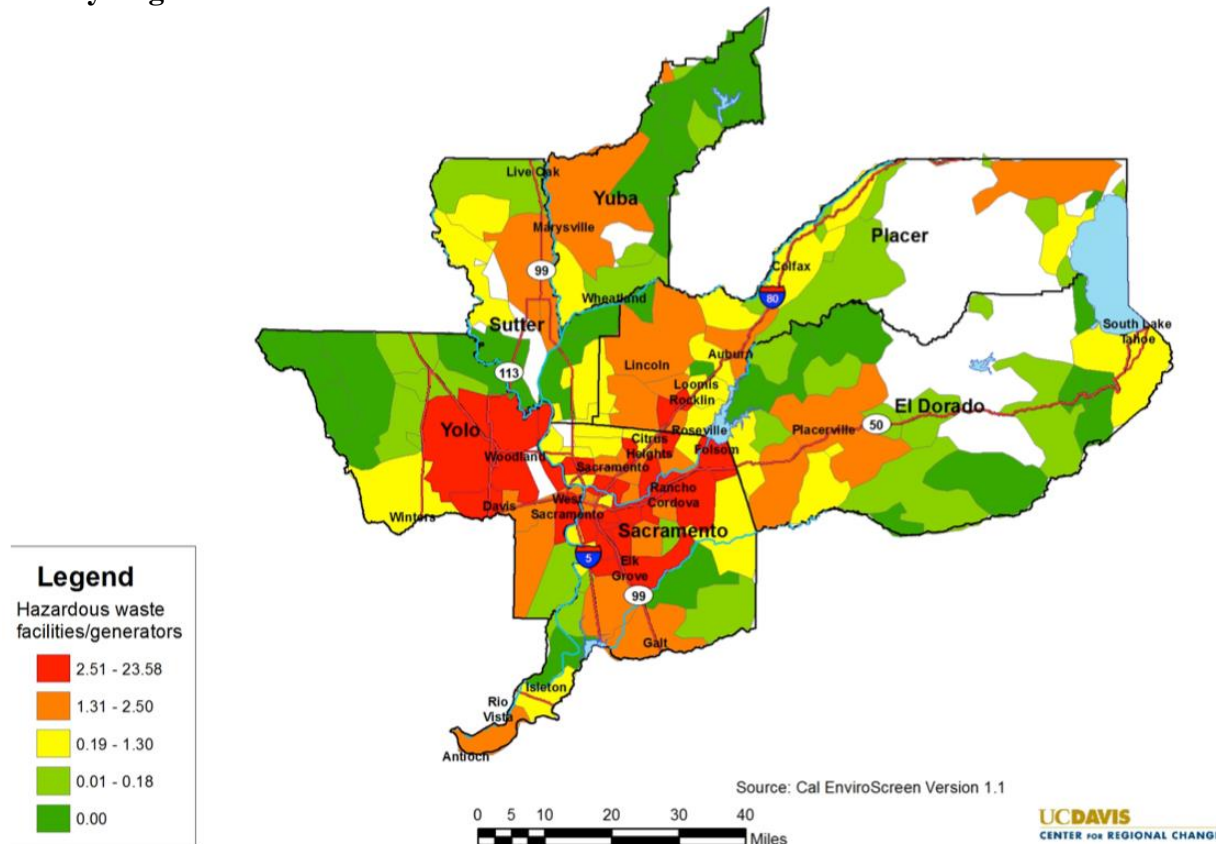


**Map 4: Areas Disproportionately Burdened by Multiple Sources of Pollution Cal-EnviroScreen Environmental Health Screening Tool, Sacramento Region by Zip Code**



Finally, Map 5 shows the distribution of hazardous waste cleanup sites, including known or publicly reported brownfields. Again, this map identifies South Sacramento and Del Paso Heights as places with high concentrations of such hazards.

**Map 5: Sum of Hazardous Waste Facilities and Generators by Zip Code, Normed to Six County Region**



### **September 2012 – Public Forum #3: Moving from Awareness to Action**

After the gathering a strong history at the February Dialogue and a clearer idea of community needs at the May Visioning Session, the Environmental Justice Initiative brought together past campaign participants to develop and consider which actions and policy outcomes should guide the campaign into its next stage on September 26, 2012 at Shriners Hospital for Children. The group presented a report on the campaign thus far that participants used to evaluate next actions, and focused on what actions must be taken to educate the Sacramento community (residents and decision-makers), which policies will have the deepest impact on the issue, and how to build a process for the remediation and development of specific sites.

Environmental Justice Initiative staff presented action arenas that came out of the data from the first two forums. The actions arenas represent the actions that must take place in order to address brownfields and vacant spaces in the region. Participants reviewed action arenas and were asked to answer questions designed to examine the arenas more thoroughly and determine key points of influence. Three questions were included:

- Whose jurisdiction does the policy falls within?
- Who is currently working in the arena?
- Who are the missing players?

Participants were also asked to examine the gaps and alliances that emerged from the data they created, using them to create working titles for action arenas that corresponded to policy recommendations. Finally, the groups identified necessary resources to support moving the action arenas forward.

#### **February 2013 – Public Forum #4: Implementing Innovative Ideas**

The goal of the February 28, 2013 public forum at Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services was to further develop the action plans considered in September. The participants also developed ideas for implementation and operationalization of the action arenas. The fourth forum served as a space to determine campaign action arenas and develop strong policy recommendations.

The following action arenas, developed through previous engagements, were presented to participants:

1. Utilize communications, publicity, and social media.
2. Conduct community outreach, education, engagement, and organizing.
3. Advocate for policy/regulatory changes and support.
4. Identify legal strategies.
5. Complete targeted brownfields assessment, remediation, and cleanup.
6. Implement brownfields and vacant spaces redevelopment, including economic strategies.
7. Identify vacant spaces and ensure abatement and cleanup.
8. Conduct and support research and data.
9. Identify, secure, and leverage funding and other resources.
10. Continue campaign coordination.

For each action arena and all others, the groups identified an implementation strategy, what stakeholders should be involved, when and where the task should be executed, and what resources would be necessary to achieve it. The feedback from this discussion directly informed the Campaign Recommendations at the end of this report. The group determined that a Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Resolution should be drafted to solicit commitment to address the issue from elected officials, agencies, stakeholders and partners, among other things. See Appendix A for a full list of action arenas and implementation strategies.

## **Harmful Impacts of Brownfields and Vacant Spaces**

As community members were engaged on issues of land use, it became clear that extensive challenges existed with the vacant homes and lots in the community and that addressing this issue would have a greatly beneficial impact on the families struggling to live healthy lives in this environment.

The impact that vacant and undeveloped parcels of land have in a community is twofold. First, there is the risk of exposure to the toxic and hazardous materials that remain at former industrial sites long after they have ceased to operate. For instance, leaky underground storage tanks often cause water pollution. The second impact is the blight and safety concerns that often accompany the presence of vacant spaces.

### **Risk of Exposure to Toxic and Hazardous Materials**

The neighborhoods engaged by the campaign are some of the oldest in Sacramento. Many were planned and developed before the necessity to segregate industrial uses from residential communities was well understood. Further, foundational to the environmental justice movement is a long history of targeting communities of color and low-income communities for the siting of unhealthy land uses. Local decision-makers have often turned a deaf ear to these communities in a manner that would simply not occur with affluent white communities. As a result, these communities are home to several toxic and formerly toxic sites, some of which are referred to as brownfields. There are parcels that formerly housed polluting activities such as metal plating and finishing, battery sales, military installations, and reclaiming metal from lighting components. There are also the remnants of recycling plants, filling stations, and dry cleaners. Those businesses left dangerous levels of lead contamination, chemical processing sludge, and PCB contamination. The history of many of these sights tells the story of mishandled toxic waste, such as the chemical sludge that was simply washed down the storm drain before the business learned proper environmental practices. Other registered toxic sites include illegal landfills and plastic manufacturers of military equipment. Of course, nearly every major intersection in these communities is the site of at least one former gas station with a leaky underground storage tanks.<sup>14</sup> These uses left sites that could not safely be redeveloped until the soil was cleaned and the toxics were gone.

When developers decontaminate and then redevelop the land for a new purpose like housing or retail, the community benefits in several ways. Brownfield redevelopment increases the health of a neighborhood by removing harmful contamination. It also enhances livability, promotes economic growth, and creates jobs in the clean-up process and reconstruction, as well as permanent new jobs at any businesses in the new development.

The following maps, produced by the U.C. Davis Center for Regional Change, illustrate the inequitable burden that low-income communities and communities of color bare when compared to other communities in the six-county region within the jurisdiction of the Sacramento Area

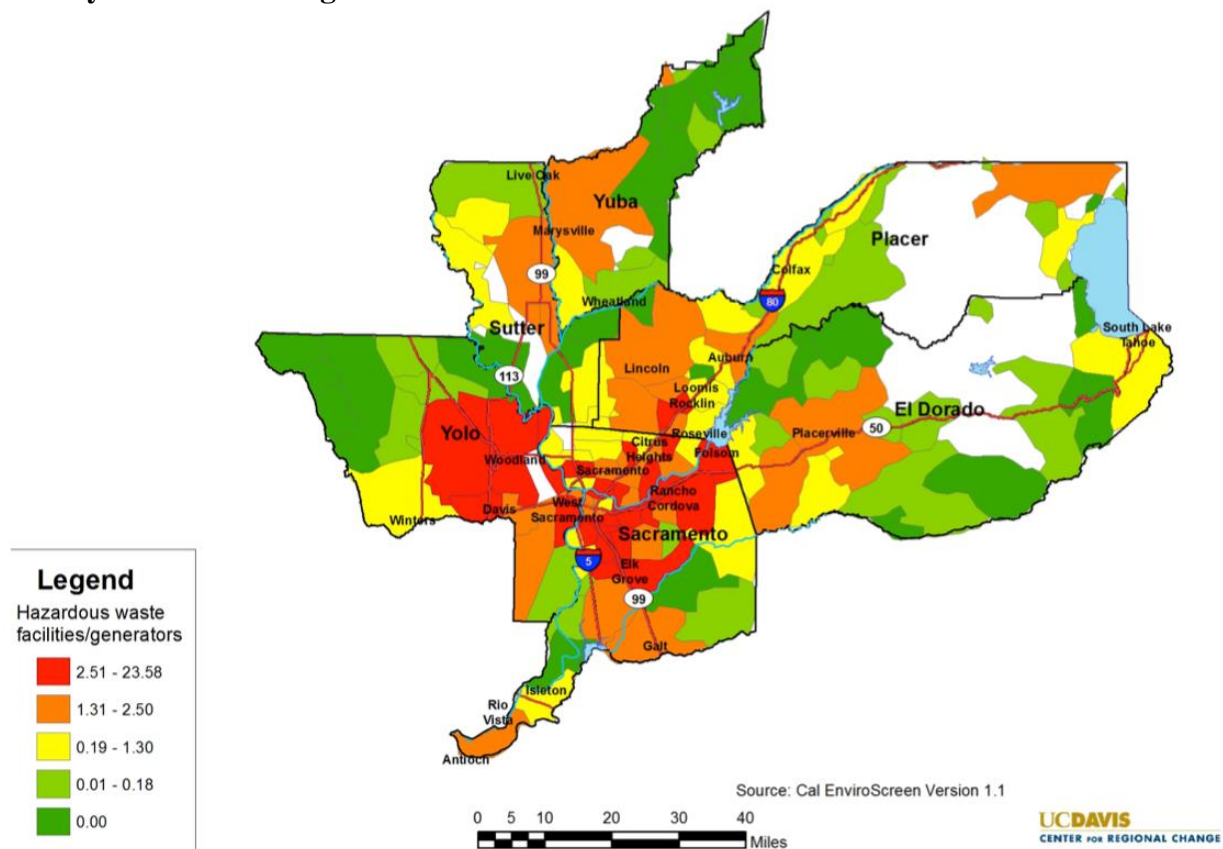
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<sup>14</sup> Information gathered from neighborhood reviews on Geotracker, State Water Resources Control Board, and US EPA Enforcement & Compliance History Online.

Council of Governments.

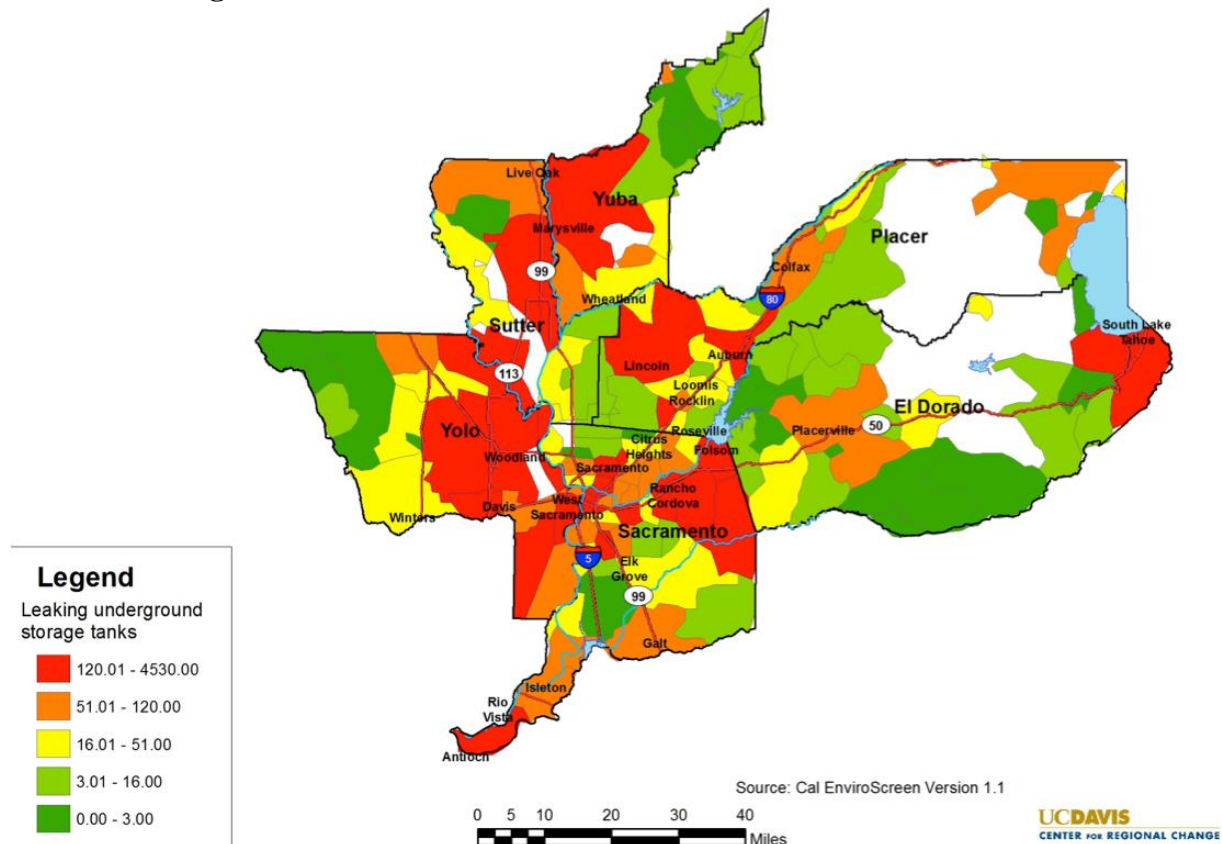
Map 6 below shows the high prevalence of hazardous waste facilities in both South Sacramento and Del Paso Heights.

**Map 6: Sum of Hazardous Waste Facilities and Generators by Zip Code, Normed to Six County Sacramento Region**



Map 7 below shows the high prevalence of leaky underground storage tanks, often left behind by closed gas stations and industrial use, in both South Sacramento and Del Paso Heights.

**Map 7: Leaking Underground Storage Tank Sites by Zip Code, Normed to Six County Sacramento Region**



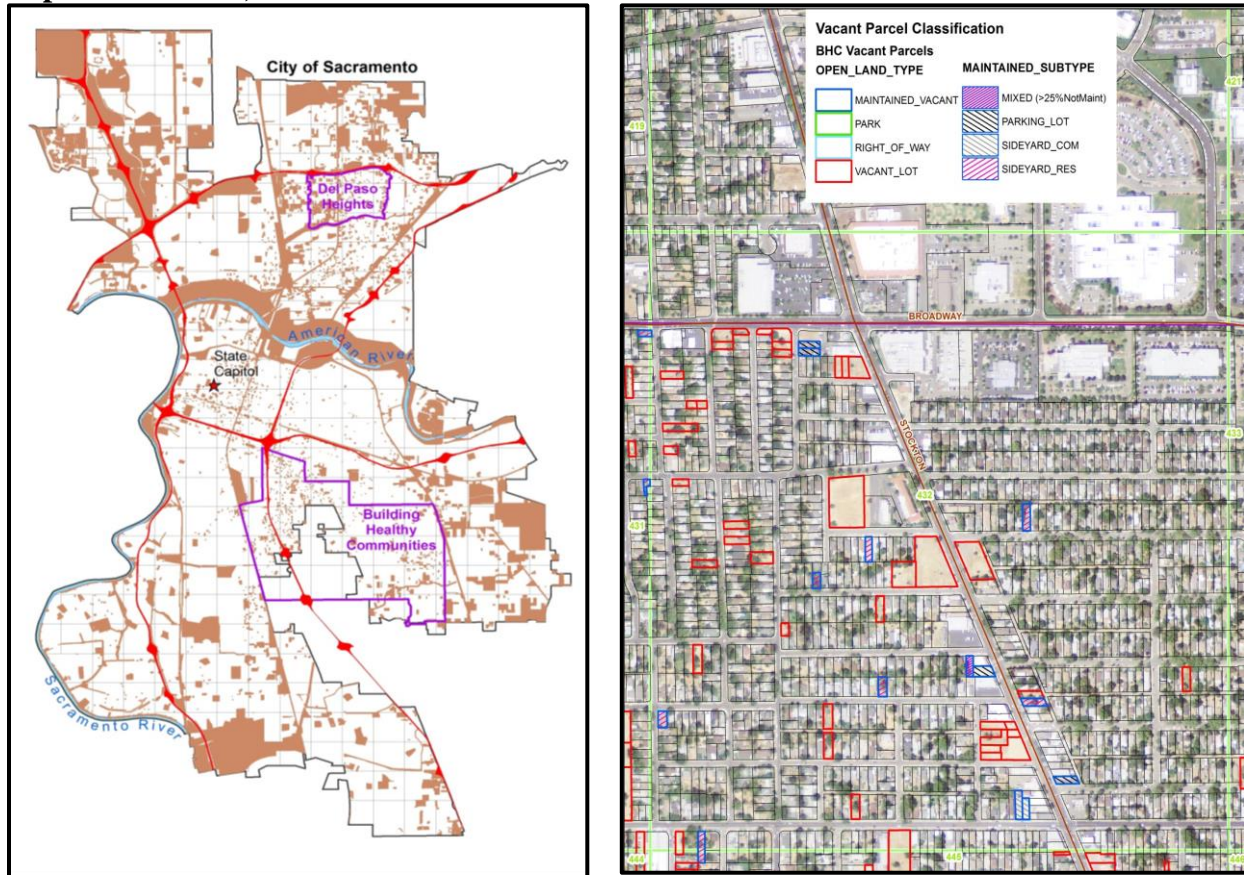
### **Blight and Safety Concerns**

The Environmental Justice Initiative learned that vacant spaces, or lots that had no buildings on them, also impacted their target neighborhoods in North and South Sacramento. The history of these lots is often unknown to the community, except for the anecdotes one can learn from long-time residents. Some lots were formerly gas stations or laundry mats, making them potential brownfields. On many of the empty lots, no one can ever remember a building on them. In addition, vacant lots attract a host of harmful and unhealthy land uses. The residents explained that the sites are commonly targeted for illegal dumping. Also, these neglected sites can become the hang out of local gangs, drug dealers, and prostitutes.

Map 8 shows the prevalence of vacant lots in the City of Sacramento, and then in one section of the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities. It is not infrequent to find numerous vacant lots clustered near each other in these neighborhoods.



**Map 8: Parcels with No Structures in the City of Sacramento, and Sacramento Building Healthy Communities Vacant Parcel Data (Source: M.L. Cadenasso, U.C. Davis, unpublished data)**



### *Illegal Dumping*

Illegal dumping has serious negative impacts on the health and safety of a community. Often, it begins with someone using a vacant lot to throw away trash. Once a pile of garbage appears, it is very likely that more garbage and junk will follow. If the location is not cleaned up quickly, these spaces tend to become unofficial dumpsites with garbage that poses significant health risks and presents dangerous safety hazards. This behavior is not just a nuisance, it lowers the quality of life for residents and it also creates serious health risks for the community.

One of the biggest health challenges posed by illegal dumping is the risk it poses to children. These illegal dumpsites can be very attractive to children. When children see an old washing machine or refrigerator lying in an empty field, their fertile imaginations might see a new playhouse or fort. However, they can easily become trapped inside and risk serious injury from nails and other rusty sharp edges. Large appliances use many chemicals in their operation that are harmful to children in the form of toxic fluids or dust. During several walk audits with residents, the Environmental Justice Initiative team found piles of old construction materials with rusty nails on the sidewalk in front of boarded-up homes. The garbage attracts rats and insects that are health risks. If the illegal dumping catches fire the community faces not only the risk of



burning adjacent structures, but also the potential for toxic smoke.

Illegal dumping can spread disease. In recent years, summer in Sacramento brings warning of the mosquito-transmitted disease, West Nile Virus. Communities are told to be vigilant about standing water where mosquitos can breed. The warm and stagnant water that can collect in illegal dumped tires, for instance, are productive breeding grounds for mosquitoes. They can breed 100 times faster than normal in this environment, creating an increased risk of the spread of disease.<sup>15</sup>

### *Crime*

Studies have long linked high crime rates to areas that have visible physical deterioration or blight.<sup>16</sup> The blight signals to potential criminals that a lower level of surveillance is present in the area, creating a permissible environment for crime. Vacant buildings and lots can indicate the type of community decay that attracts individuals intent on delinquent behavior. Abandoned buildings are places for those engaged in criminal activity to gather unseen by police and other community members. Many vacant lots are overgrown with untended vegetation and filled with trash from illegal dumping, which makes them attractive places to hide illegal guns, conduct illegal activities such as drug sales and prostitution, and engage in violent crime.

Due to the foreclosure crisis, some neighborhoods in Sacramento had a sudden and high number of empty homes.<sup>17</sup> These buildings blight the community with poorly maintained landscaping and broken and boarded up windows, often with the possessions of the previous owner littering the front yard. Even prior to entering foreclosure, cash-strapped owners usually have a difficult time properly maintaining their houses. After foreclosure, these properties may be vacant for an extended period of time, attracting vandalism and crime.<sup>18</sup> Residents explained that the vacant homes also attracted squatters and others, becoming drug dens, spaces for illegal sex acts and crash pads. Vacant lots and homes create a permissible environment for crime that no community should have to suffer.

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<sup>15</sup> San Joaquin County. <http://www.sjgov.org/idmpg/dynamic.aspx?id=9798>

<sup>16</sup> Greenberg, M., and C. Lee. (1999) "Public Health and Brownfields: Reviving the Past to Protect the Future," *American Journal of Public Health*.

<sup>17</sup> Schuetz, J., and V. Been. (2008) "Neighborhood Effects of Concentrated Mortgage Foreclosures," *Journal of Housing Economics*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## Campaign Recommendations

The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign has utilized several strategies to engage Sacramento's environmental justice communities in addressing the issue of brownfields and vacant spaces, all of which are detailed above. The following are the set of campaign recommendations that community members, advocates, and local decision-makers can work to enact.

### *Strengthen Partnership between Government, Nonprofits, and Residents*

- **Establish a Sacramento Environmental Justice Working Group** – Ubuntu Green will work with government entities, local nonprofits, and residents to establish an Environmental Justice Working Group to identify opportunities for collaboration on issues facing environmental justice communities in the Sacramento Region. This group will establish a strong and united voice for environmental justice that utilizes the knowledge of residents with the support of local governments and nonprofits.
- **Create and implement comprehensive community plans** – Government entities should work with local nonprofits (including Ubuntu Green and the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities) and residents to create comprehensive community plans for environmental justice communities, specifically in the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities and Del Paso Heights areas. A clear community vision is a vital part of transforming communities into healthy, vibrant, and livable places.

### *Create Entities to Facilitate Brownfield Remediation and the Use of Vacant Spaces*

- **Establish land banking authorities** – Government entities should work with local community development corporations and local nonprofits (including Ubuntu Green and the Building Healthy Communities Initiative) to create land banks in the Sacramento Region. These entities are public or community-owned, and are created for a single purpose: to acquire, manage, maintain, and repurpose vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed properties. Land banks can empower communities to address the worst abandoned houses, forgotten buildings, and empty lots.
- **Establish community development corporations** – Community stakeholders, including Ubuntu Green and Legal Services of Northern California, should support the establishment of additional community development corporations to support the work needed in the most impacted communities in the Sacramento Region. In the absence of redevelopment funding in California, community development corporations can provide a vehicle to draw in federal, state, and private dollars to support projects in environmental justice communities.

### *Strengthen Local Policies to Promote Healthy Solutions through the Built Environment*

- **Identify funding for brownfields remediation** – Government entities should work with local community development corporations and local nonprofits (including Ubuntu Green and the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities) to identify and pursue federal, state, and private dollars to support brownfield rehabilitation. Funding is the most essential and challenging aspect of addressing brownfields in Sacramento.

- **Develop a Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign Resolution** – The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign will draft a resolution on brownfields and vacant spaces to be adopted by elected officials and agencies, non-profits and other stakeholders. This resolution will help create political, stakeholder and community support for specific projects moving forward.
- **Strengthen the Rental Housing Inspection Program** – Government entities should work with private land owners and non-profits to strengthen the Rental Housing Inspection Program to be similar to that of the City of Sacramento. The upkeep of rental housing is key to the health of tenants, and also deters illegal dumping.
- **Prevent and clean-up illegal dumping on vacant lots** - Government entities should work with local nonprofits (including Ubuntu Green and the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities), private land owners, and residents to strengthen illegal dumping laws and other measures to deter and clean-up dumping on vacant lots. Effective enforcement of illegal dumping ordinances is the responsibility of local government agencies, and must be tailored to the specific needs of each community.
- **Promote infill development** – Government entities should work with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, Sacramento Regional Transit, the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, local community development corporations, local nonprofits, and private land owners to promote local and regional infill development. Infill development concentrates new development in areas where infrastructure such as public transit and sewer and water already exist, rather than in undeveloped “greenfields.” Infill development also directs new investment into existing communities, which includes environmental justice communities.
- **Remove barriers to urban agriculture** –Government entities should work with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, local nonprofit organizations, local farmers, private and public landowners, and residents to remove barriers for the use of vacant spaces for agriculture and the sale of such produce at farms stands, farmers markets and corner stores. Urban agriculture is an alternative use for vacant lots in neighborhoods that struggles with healthy food access, and provides important entrepreneurial opportunities for environmental justice communities.
- **Promote recreational activities** – Government should work with local nonprofits, schools, and residents to promote parks, sport fields, and other recreational activities on brownfields (after clean-up) and vacant spaces. Vacant spaces in environmental justice communities should be made into outdoor spaces that promote healthy activities.

## **Campaign Commitments**

The Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign will work to engage a broader swath of the Sacramento community to activate individuals who can assist with campaigns or conduct research and data collection.

The Sacramento Environmental Justice Working Group will hold its first meeting in February 2014. All stakeholders from the Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign are encouraged to attend, as this working group will be charged with the oversight of the campaign recommendations moving forward.

The U.C. Davis Center for Regional Change will work with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments and Legal Services of Northern California, two existing agencies that collect data on environmental justice issues, to fill gaps of data and research needed to support the Sacramento Environmental Justice Working Group and related community efforts. Such gaps include a site inventory of all vacant lots in the target communities, as well as the impact of the housing market rebound on the target communities.

## **Conclusion**

The action items described above were developed through the Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Campaign dialogues, forums, and related community engagements. The Environmental Justice Initiative will continue to coordinate the campaign, but needs the support of other nonprofits and government entities to make these recommendations a reality. No longer can we continue to overlook the most environmentally and economically impacted communities in our region.

## Appendix A: List of Implementation Steps for the Ten Action Arenas

	Rec. #1	Rec. #2	Rec. #3	Rec. #4	Rec. #5	Rec. #6	Rec. #7	Rec. #8	Rec. #9
Action Arena	Train & engage existing groups to utilize their resources to help publicize these issues.	Create a development umbrella to capture existing resources to address needs.	Engaged & informed community organizers bringing out residents.		Create capacity.		Coordinated database to report problems.	Educate, empower, & reallocate resources.	Coalescing with policy leadership & grassroots.
Implementation Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Push City Council to use their media relations, social networks, and contacts</li> <li>• Engage neighborhood associations and youth to use their media tools</li> <li>• Create relationships with key media players</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate inventory of assets in community and tap into existing resources, inventory, and coordinate</li> <li>• Articulate clear umbrella/platform</li> <li>• Tools for organizing: train the trainer, curriculum and tools to mobilize existing and new base</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster and incentivize legal pressure on property owners</li> <li>• Encourage resident dialogue</li> <li>• Rally residents around visioning</li> <li>• Understand how to utilize &amp; build capacity of community organizers</li> <li>• Identify gov't officials responsible for policy &amp; regulation enforcement</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct needs assessment</li> <li>• Create a community and economic development plan</li> <li>• Develop coalition with clear leadership</li> <li>• Educate institutional partners</li> <li>• Create community development corporation</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reallocate resources and funding (i.e. street cleaning)</li> <li>• Community orgs &amp; residents meet with elected &amp; staff on need for neighborhood clean-up &amp; ability to report problems</li> <li>• Create centralized database to report problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community education and engagement on using data</li> <li>• Educate elected officials and staff on importance of community data/knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet with state, federal, and local electeds</li> </ul>

## Appendix B: Proposed Next Steps for Stakeholders

	Ubuntu Green	Residents	BVS Campaign	Sac BHC	Legal Services	Nonprofits	Gov't	SACOG	Sac Air District	Sac RT	Comm Dev Corps	Private Prop Owners	Farmers	Schools
Sacramento EJ Working Group	X	X				X	X							
Comprehensive Community Plans	X	X		X		X	X							
Land Banking Authorities	X			X		X	X				X			
Community Development Corporations	X				X									
Funding for Brownfields Remediation	X			X		X	X				X			
Brownfields and Vacant Spaces Resolution			X											
Rental Housing Inspection Programs						X	X					X		
Illegal Dumping on Vacant Lots	X	X		X		X	X					X		
Infill Development						X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Urban Agriculture		X				X	X	X				X	X	
Recreational Activities		X				X	X							X