

Keeping Community in Development

OPED: Governor's proposal to ax CRAs would harm poor neighborhoods with few private-sector options.

By ALVARO HUERTA

Monday, March 28, 2011

As an urban planning scholar who grew up in the blighted Ramona Housing Gardens project in East Los Angeles, I am against Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to eliminate the California redevelopment agencies and raid their coffers. If Brown prevails, we will also see the demise of the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles.

Given that Brown is desperately attempting to clean up former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's mess, where the action hero relied on massive borrowing and other chicanery to balance the budget, I don't blame the new governor for seeking creative ways to save California from financial bankruptcy. The state budget, however, should not be balanced on the backs of the less fortunate – those who directly benefit from public redevelopment agencies' work to revitalize their communities. This includes racial minorities, immigrants and other working-class people who live in blighted communities in desperate need of urban redevelopment efforts.

In general terms, public redevelopment agencies exist to meet the needs of the public where the private markets fail. While individual entrepreneurs and corporations respond to profits and the bottom line, public redevelopment officials and agencies, in theory, respond to the public interest. Since it's not in the self-interest of private-market actors to create public parks, community facilities and affordable housing units in America's barrios and ghettos, there's a great need for redevelopment agencies to meet those kinds of public needs.

As public places, parks can't exclude individuals from enjoying all the benefits that open green spaces have to offer. Thus, if not for public redevelopment agencies, we would all lose the pleasures of spending a Saturday morning at the park without worrying about spending \$20 for parking and forking out an exaggerated entrance fee for entertainment activities, especially during this Great Recession.

By simply viewing CRA/LA's website, Angelenos can learn more about this local redevelopment agency and its multimillion-dollar projects in the areas of affordable and mixed-income housing, commercial-retail, industrial, community facility, open-space/parks, public facilities and public improvement projects. These projects represent key economic activity for Los Angeles in terms of creating jobs, luring businesses, promoting tourism and improving the built environment.

However, if CRA/LA aims to get the public in their corner for this important fight, its leaders – and City Hall – need to do a better job of incorporating the general public in all areas of its operations and programs.

For instance, in order to get community members to buy into the mission of CRA/LA, redevelopment officials and commissioners should hold town hall meetings in underserved communities such as East Los Angeles, South Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley.

These meetings should occur on weekends in places where community members can easily access them, like public schools, libraries and community centers. Not only should translation be available to cater to the specific ethnic area, but public meetings should also be conducted in a language accessible to average community members and not simply to special interests such as lobbyists, contractors and lawyers.

Overall, there should be a bottom-up approach to planning at CRA/LA, where impacted community members play a major role in identifying the problems in their neighborhoods and participate in the

overall process of designing livable communities without displacing the most vulnerable populations.

Positive step

This includes having community members serve as commissioners. On a related point, I must say that the recent appointment of civil rights activist and lawyer Victor Narro as a new CRA/LA commissioner represents a positive and progressive move on Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's part.

Too often, unfortunately, the improvement of blighted communities translates into gentrification, where outsiders displace long-term residents, especially in areas where Latinos and African-Americans reside.

This needs to stop. We should create ways to improve the physical environment in poor communities without forcing out those individuals and families with the least resources to relocate.

In order to fully support the numerous redevelopment agencies against Brown's plan – with an estimated \$5.5 billion in potential revenue for the state at stake – we need to learn hard lessons from the dark history of controversial redevelopment projects. As part of the urban renewal movement of the last century, for example, public officials and private interests colluded to displace a vibrant Latino community, Chavez Ravine, in order to build a baseball stadium in 1959 and bring a Major League Baseball team to Los Angeles: the Dodgers.

Actually, we don't need to go back that far to uncover the special interests behind many of these lucrative deals at the expense of the powerless. While at a smaller scale, public officials and private interests colluded, once again, to displace hundreds of Latino residents from their apartments in downtown Los Angeles to build the Staples Center in 1998 as a home for the Lakers, Clipper and Kings.

That being said, in a time when Angelenos need more resources to rebound from this economic downturn, we need to rally behind CRA/LA to keep much needed redevelopment funds and projects in the nation's second largest city. The fact that Latinos constitute half of L.A.'s population also makes this a civil rights issue.

In short, the public should fully support redevelopment agencies at the local and statewide levels under the condition that those in power serve in the public interest, instead of the status quo.

Alvaro Huerta is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of City and Regional Planning at UC Berkeley and a visiting scholar at the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA.



Subscribe
today for
only \$1.96
per week!

