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# Which Came First, Hazardous Site or Minority Population?

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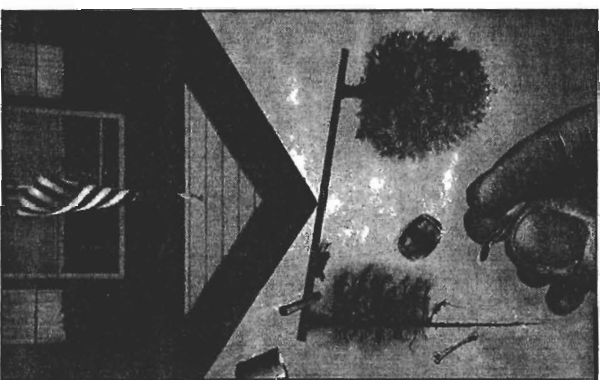
A spate of bills seeking to make environmental justice a new element in state policymaking passed the California Legislature last month. For example, state Sen. Hilda Solis (D-La Puente) sponsored legislation directing the Office of Planning and Research to develop environmental-justice guidelines. Although the bill was watered down to gain business support, it was a step in the right direction.

Environmental justice, an extension of the equal-protection guarantees of the Constitution and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, is the idea that all communities have an equal right to protection from environmental hazards. Although a 1994 presidential executive order reaffirmed this concept as national policy, many communities suffer from environmental inequities. In Southern California, for example, Latinos and African Americans are two to three times more likely to live

near a hazardous-waste facility and nearly two times more likely to live near reported releases of cancer-causing chemicals. The "risky" of the Southland is highly correlated with race.

Some academic analysts and policymakers wonder whether government should be concerned about environmental justice. They contend that the relationship between race and proximity to environmental hazards might be an indirect consequence of other factors like income, which is highly correlated with race. Moreover, they point to the possibility that choice, rather than victimization, might help explain the current pattern of disproportionate exposure. Minorities may choose to live near hazardous facilities, or move to adjacent neighborhoods, because housing there costs less.

Is the current pattern of environmental inequity really a "field of bad dreams"? Would the hazard and minorities will come? The answer matters if policy recommendations that Solis seeks from the Office of Planning and Research are to make sense. If the current situation results from siting dangerous facilities in or near existing minority communities, then it's reasonable to review permitting processes, public participation and local zoning. But if minorities are moving to the hazard, the best one could hope for is to inform people



MELISSA SZALKOWSKI/For The Times

of the risks they face.

In collaboration with the Liberty Hill Foundation and the California Endowment, we collected data on the history and geography of the siting of permitted

hazardous-waste treatment, storage and disposal facilities in Los Angeles County to decide the issue. We then linked this information to a database of demographic and other information from the 1970, 1980 and 1990 Censuses. This allowed us to determine the racial and demographic character of neighborhoods at the time a hazardous facility was sited, then to track its effect on community demographics over time.

The results were both striking and statistically significant. Communities hosting these hazardous facilities were more minority, poorer and had lower rates of home ownership than communities that have none. Neighborhoods with hazardous-waste sites became even more minority after a hazardous facility was sited, but no more so than the rest of L.A. County. We used other statistical techniques to attempt to separate out the independent influence of other factors, like income, and to allow for demographic change at the time of siting. No matter how we cut it, the results were the same: The current pattern of hazardous facilities in minority communities is best explained by siting bias, not by minorities later moving in.

Intuitively, neighborhoods most at risk are those with large mixed populations of African Americans and Latinos, and those that recently underwent a major

ethnic change. This may reflect the difficulty faced by racially mixed communities in calling on a common history to bring neighbors together to resist the siting of a dangerous facility. It also suggests that the environmental-justice movement is right to focus on building bridges between ethnic groups as a means to empower communities.

Emphasizing the history of hazard siting may seem a bit like crying over spilled milk, particularly since raising this past might jeopardize successful business-community collaborations to develop "brownfields": polluted sites whose cleanup and redevelopment can promote both environmental integrity and inner-city economics. Such collaborations should be applauded, but knowledge of the past can provide some guidance for an even better future.

As the state decides how much weight to give environmental justice in policymaking, the focus should stay on siting, zoning and permits—not on the idea that people choose to live near a hazardous facility because the surrounding housing is cheaper. California has historically led the nation in protecting the environment. Now it should lead the way to environmental justice by protecting the health of every member of its diverse population. □