

Case Study (from Why Place Matters Publication by PolicyLink and The California Endowment,, p.39)

Keeping Housing Away from Freeways and Toxic Polluters

In Otay-Mesa, south of San Diego, developers have proposed 5,500 units of new housing in a largely industrial area near a major freeway. When staff at the San Diego Regional Asthma Coalition learned about the proposal, they began working with partners to stop it. They knew that housing built near polluting businesses and highways could lead to higher rates of asthma and other respiratory diseases for residents—in this case, lower-income Hispanics.

Some unlikely partners joined the effort, for some unexpected reasons. Businesses in the area approached the Asthma Coalition with questions about the health impact of locating residences near the highway. They, too, wanted to stop the development because they feared that once housing was constructed in the area, they might have to relocate their factories because of health concerns.

Their concerns sprang from an ordinance passed in nearby National City in 2006. That law requires polluters to relocate from residential areas to keep toxins out. The Asthma Coalition had helped create the National City ordinance, too. It acted after noticing that efforts to help asthma sufferers at home were failing because nearby industries were pumping out pollutants that trigger the disease. In response, the town created the National City Asthma Committee, which spearheaded the law.

To avoid a similar fight in Otay-Mesa, the local chamber of commerce, along with local businesses, decided to partner with the Asthma Coalition to stop the developers before people started getting sick or new housing shut down local industry. Plans have slowed as a result, and developers have redrafted their proposals. The development may still go forward, but not without due consideration of prospective residents' health.