

The time a youth group created new housing policy



A youth group in Los Angeles created housing policy for a neighborhood specific plan that became a new model for affordable housing policy across the City.



It started during an activity in which youth would identify problems in the community and try to come up with solutions. In a previous iteration of this activity run by the youth group – the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA) – the youth had identified that they needed more money for school supplies. So SEACA started a fund for school supplies and created a lending library for some of the more expensive school equipment. But, this time, the youth had something different on their mind.

Sissy Trinh, SEACA’s Executive Director explains, “One of the issues was this new specific plan that the City was proposing. You’ve seen those before and after renderings, right? Empty lot, dirt road, and then all the sudden you see high rises with people biking and having coffee on the sidewalk. And the students looked at the pictures and said, ‘this is beautiful, but where are we in this? This is Chinatown and

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Lincoln Heights. These are the two oldest neighborhoods in the city. Why isn't this plan reflecting who lives here now?

"I said, 'we don't know anything about land use. We don't know anything about development.' But they were like, 'You're pushing us to go off to college and we're going to go to college without homes.' And it was just like, 'you're right.' That's how we got involved in this issue.

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"We started by googling 'How do you get affordable housing?' 'What is a specific plan?' And I'm not joking when I say these things. We had no background and no expertise. We're a youth organization... I didn't know what Urban Planning is...

"We realized early on [that] there would be four issues we needed to learn about, so we broke the youth up into four teams. One was affordable housing, the other was jobs, the third was environment, and the fourth was politics. We knew it had to go through City Hall but we didn't know what the process was, who we could talk to, who are the experts. So we started literally to google... Who is the Planning Commission? Who is the Community Redevelopment Agency?...

"With the youth, we would talk about what the law allows currently, and this is what's happening in the neighborhood... Almost all of the subsidies for low-income housing go to [households who make more money than the youths' families]. Our folks are extremely low income. Our students were like 'Do we argue for more affordable housing even if it's gonna gentrify our neighborhoods? What's important to us? What can we do?' I didn't put limits on it... Having conversations with the students to see what are their compromise points, and what are their bottom lines, 'no we aren't willing to agree to this.' ...And so what came out was we want to prioritize deeper affordability... Because of who lives here. And their families of course...

"Once we established the larger picture priorities... we worked [with pro bono attorneys and consultants] to create the incentive program that was the first in the city and I think maybe in the country that included a set aside for extremely low-income households...

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“Because we didn’t know what we were doing, but we were like, this is what we want. Not realizing that it’s really hard to get people to go that level in affordability. Some of our [friends and colleagues in other community-based organizations] told us that the City would never accept it. But we got it. Was it hard? Was it supposed to be hard? Because this was just really important because we didn’t know what resistance meant. Or what is done and not done in the City because we had no background. In some ways that ignorance made it easier because we just didn’t stress about whether it’s been done before. We never knew it hadn’t been done before. We just knew that we wanted it.

“Once we created the structure for the incentive program and our proposals for the plan, we were negotiating for everything. Parking set asides, base density, max density, EIR. All this stuff. Then what happened was we were able to create our own version that utilized the existing structure they had created at the city. Then we started focusing on the people in Planning Commission and in city hall. What was helpful was we were able

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to frame it as, ‘We have our own version of the plan.’ Instead of ‘we’re against this plan.’ There were a couple of planning commissioners who started to support our plan. A lot of it too was that, at the time, a lot of the commissioners were hearing ‘These people want to keep their communities slums. They don’t want new development. They want to keep it bad.’

For us we were conscious of delivering a message that ‘We’re not against change, we’re not against density. But we need to make sure that it benefits our families and our communities.’ And then giving them our version of the proposal. So then what made it easy was then the commissioners that were [supporting us]... were able to say ‘Have you seen the SEACA plan?’ ...And so because we had already done so much homework... they didn’t have to delay the process. It was a function of is there a compromise or not.”

And so the Cornfield Arroyo Specific Plan (CASP) passed with a new, innovative provision – the youths’ provision – to promote more affordable housing for extremely low income people. The CASP model eventually became the basis for a set of affordable housing and transit-oriented development policy changes that were

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advocated by a coalition of Los Angeles grassroots organizations (including SEACA and a number of other LA AAPI orgs like KIWA, LTSC, and Thai CDC) and then passed through voter initiative.

Other Wins & Lessons Learned

Putting Youth First

Sophanarot Sam, Youth Trainer at SEACA says that SEACA’s vision of Community Organizing is “engaging our most vulnerable populations in the process of decision making – to engage our youth and develop them to be the future leaders in our community. For us, the process is starting them off with political education, with popular education, to understand why it’s so important for them to represent their families, especially because of the language barrier that we face in a lot of policy.”

Youth Leadership Development

Sophanarot says, “We start off new students with leadership development workshops. They can spend up to a whole year to do this.... We talk about family histories and family stories – what matters to them, what they want to fight and what they want to see changed in their community. From there, we do political education around their identity. Because our community is so diverse – we have Southeast Asian, Latinx, Chinese, Black students – it’s a very diverse group. We have to make it specific to a community related topic. What they all have in common is the neighborhoods – Chinatown, Lincoln Heights. Those are extremely low-income neighborhoods.”



SEACA’s mission is “to build power among Southeast Asian youth and their communities in Los Angeles for a more just and equitable society through intergenerational, multiethnic dialogue, leadership development, and community organizing.”

URL: <http://www.seaca-la.org/>

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