Blueprint for Injustice

“We didn’t know anything about what we were voting for; this vote was dropped on us with one day to decide, and we were told the money would be lost if we didn’t vote yes,” was the response I received from a South Sacramento AB 617 Community Steering Committee member during a public meeting, when asked why the CSC funded Pepsi for ZEV Tesla trucks when our communities suffer from diabetes disproportionate to wealthier communities. That conversation happened just this month. We’d be fools to think the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District didn’t have plans to fund Pepsi long before they asked the CSC for a vote; they weren’t going to let that money go.

The steering committee members with good intentions have been treated like fools to fascinate; while the others are shills in the service of our local elected politicians, who also sit on SacMetro’s and CARB’s Boards. This is how a CARB Board member’s industrial pet project, as an elected official, evaded AB 617 scrutiny to the disbenefit of the most marginalized and polluted communities in South Sacramento. The communities of Woodbine and Avenues were treated unfairly, and robbed of their voice in matters that affected them.

During the AB 617 meeting to vote on CERP boundaries, held three days ago (July 22, 2024), I made a plea to the CSC to give those excluded communities their voice back. They did a lot of hang wringing with sad faces while discussing doing right for those communities. But at the end of the meeting, when the agenda for the next two monthly meetings came up, there was no mention of correcting past injustices inflicted on Woodbine and the Avenues, just moving forward with the CERP. No one even asked for a discussion on those injustices.

The district offered me air monitoring in the communities I spoke up for, for another year. They were bypassing the CSC and the implication to me was that this was something above and beyond what’s already on the books. Theres funding for another year of Community Air Protection Monitoring (CAMP); they were offering (haggling with) what the community is already owed. I have serious concerns that the remaining CAMP funding (1.2 million) isn’t nearly enough to properly characterize the air in those excluded communities, as well as engage and educate those communities to make informed decisions about their own lives. As mentioned, the current steering committee are treated like fools to be fascinated, and they seem to like it. They can’t be trusted to make decisions for Woodbine and the Avenues.

From the start, environmental justice has not been emphasized as part of the South Sacramento AB 617 process; they still treat it as a monitoring exercise. Also this month, I saw the presentation the district was sharing with communities as part of the CERP outreach, and there was zero mention of justice being a component of this process.

During the same meeting, it was asked if the CSC could ask the Board to consider separate CAMP and CERP. CARB staff indicated that the legislation doesn’t preclude that, but that it’s also a long process, thus discouraging the CSC from making that request. In effect, he held the line for SacMetro, to the disbenefit of the excluded communities. CARB is still prioritizing SacMetro’s image, over the community’s fair treatment. The truth is nothing prevents the CSC from telling you the CAMP is an abysmal failure and requesting separate CAMP and CERP CSCs with the understanding the CARB Board has the authority to grant that, or at least ask that they come back with a new proposal in September. The nascency of the CSC’s concerns to really correct the injustices to the Avenues and Woodbine, were stifled thanks to Kevin’s comment being a partial truth. He didn’t lie, but his answer limited the possibilities for a community whose limits are those the district has conditioned them to believe are the limits of the program, even as other AB 617 communities have done more. That’s been the standard operating procedure for treating the CSC going back to the initial CAMP boundary discussions, when maps where presented that didn’t even include the most marginalized communities.

I’m guessing that despite CARB’s Office of Community Air Protection calling the South Sac AB 617 CAMP a success, they also call it an abysmal failure privately; there’s no report for the community to digest and some of the steering committee still feeling uniformed. The SacMetro presentation I mentioned them using for CERP outreach indicated good air quality except during wildfires. So, I asked, “if the air is so good, why are you moving to a CERP instead of finding where the air is bad?” The CSC reacted by telling SacMetro that their slides don’t jive with their own experiences; but then again, they were promoting the same slides themselves, until I informed them of what they were looking at.

Separately, the two pollution slides from SacMetro’s CERP outreach were for PM2.5 and VOCs. The excluded community of the Avenues sits across from your former Board member’s industrial pet project. Besides the projected 800 heavy duty needed to feed the sewage digestor (I provided links to articles in previous written public comment), a very old facility (Campbells Soup) was torn down to accommodate it and huge mounds of dirt (40 ft tall) sit on the property. In addition, the area is home to many body shops. Highway 99 runs adjacent to the community and probably contributes brake and road dust to the pollution plaguing the Avenues. Yet, the CSC didn’t think to ask for PM10 results because they don’t even know what they should be looking for in terms of monitoring and justice. After school, the kids from both the Avenues and Woodbine, walk between this pet project and another industrial park, towards their homes next to highway 99. Most Bay Area advocates would have had concerns about the lack of wind barriers around the industrial project, to keep the wind and whatever is in the soil of an industrial park, from blowing into the community; we’ve had a lot of windy days this year too. They would’ve wanted to know if asbestos were in the buildings that were torn down. No one on this CSC thought to ask those questions. After 5 years of serving on a CAMP, its telling that most didn’t know the communities just outside their boundaries; its telling that most don’t know what pollutants they should be concerned about; its telling that within the last month, CSC members have still complained about feeling steered; It’s telling there is no report to share with community, and the outreach materials conclude “there’s nothing to see here.”

I was hopeful after my testimony in October because I sensed a tension that led to what seemed like productive discussions. After more consideration, I see that everyone is who they were when they showed me who they were the first time. James Baldwin said, “It’s easier for people to cry, than to change.” You guys are great at hand wringing and crying, but don’t really change much.

I don’t oppose a CERP, but I do oppose moving past the injustices and failures of the South Sacramento AB 617 CAMP. Please note that SacMetro, the shills and fools on the CSC, and even CARB Staff did everything in their power to keep you, the CARB Board from hearing this message. I don’t know who William Penn is, but I appreciate him saying, “Right is right, even if everyone is against it, and wrong is wrong, even if everyone is for it.” You can probably win a lot of folks over by legitimizing them as important partners and providing some funding. Me, I just want to see a correctable injustice that changed my view of the world and pained me, corrected. They not like me!

Sincerely,

Mauro Libre