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How SB 607 threatens California's environmental protection: the dangers of gutting CEQA

Senate Bill 607 poses one of the most serious threats in decades to the California Environmental Quality Act, undermining a 50-year legacy of environmental protection and public participation, and endangering vulnerable communities by weakening critical environmental review and accountability.

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For the past 50 years, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) has been a bill of rights for participatory democracy and environmental protection in California. Senate Bill 607 would put an end to that. While numerous bills are touching on CEQA every year, Senate Bill 607 represents one of the greatest threats to the continued viability of California's pre-eminent environmental law. In March, over 130 environmental and environmental justice organizations expressed strong opposition to the bill, now recorded in the bill's legislative analyses, yet it has continued to steamroll its way through the Legislature.

The Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment (CRPE) works alongside low-income communities of color in the San Joaquin Valley. Groups like CRPE work elsewhere around the state, including near freeways, ports, railyards, dairies, and other industrial facilities. These communities breathe the most polluted air in the country, and have to work every day to keep their neighborhoods safe and healthy. The environmental review process ensured by CEQA is how these communities have been able to fight back. These frontline communities are like the canaries in a coal mine, providing an indicator of the future health of California. And, as multiple studies show, the prospects are not looking good.

CEQA is one of the few tools our



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communities possess to inform themselves about the potentially harmful impacts of proposed development projects – and to lessen these projects' harmful impacts on residents. The results of the CEQA process are impressive. Using CEQA, agencies have required the electrification of industrial projects, avoided the destruction of affordable housing, and mitigated significant harms from large infrastructure projects.

Senate Bill 607 would significantly hinder the ability of environmental justice organizations to prevent harm to their communities – and it would

do so at the worst possible time. Since Jan. 20, the Trump administration has moved rapidly to dismantle federal and public health environmental laws. (See K. Bundy, J. Ganata, "CEQA: California's last line of defense against Trump's environmental rollbacks," *Daily Journal*, Mar. 6, 2025.) It has essentially discarded the National Environmental Policy Act (the federal equivalent of CEQA) and just this month the president issued an executive order directing the Department of Justice to unwind "disparate impact" regulations established under federal

civil rights laws. Now more than ever, strong state laws are needed to safeguard public health in overburdened communities. Yet Senate Bill 607 proposes to directly undermine California's strongest environmental law.

Senate Bill 607 would harm all Californians, especially environmental justice communities, because it would limit critical environmental review for potentially destructive projects. Specifically, the bill would flip the standard of review for determining whether an environmental impact report (EIR) should be prepared at all. Without an EIR, vulnerable communities would be left in the dark about the potential damage that industrial and other projects pose to their neighborhoods; residents would be unable to voice their concerns and offer suggestions for improving these projects. Approving harmful projects – like factories, dairies, port and freeway expansions – without vital public input or consideration of environmental mitigations, cumulative impacts on already burdened communities, or safer alternatives, is how environmental and health disasters occur. Bypassing an EIR opens the door to serious harms that could have been avoided altogether, yet this is exactly what Senate Bill 607 would allow.

Environmental justice communities support housing affordability and are not abusing CEQA. At the same time, CEQA is not the cause of the housing affordability crisis.

The Housing Workshop, “CEQA by the Numbers: Myths & Facts,” (Rose Foundation 2023) at 53. Adequate environmental review is crucial for the safety of our communities, and new projects must not perpetuate the historical cycle of environmental injustice in black and brown, low-income communities.

Some supporters of Senate Bill 607 have cited a handful of lawsuits against beneficial projects. Yet, for every such anecdote, there are dozens of examples of CEQA protecting communities from harmful projects by requiring mitigation of their adverse impacts. Senate Bill 607’s radical approach to “reforming” CEQA would throw the baby out with the bathwater. While Senate Bill 607 has been framed as a bill to promote housing production in California, it is much more sweeping than that; indeed, the bill would severely weaken CEQA across the board, for nearly all projects in California.

CEQA protects the right and the ability of common citizens to hold powerful developers and bureaucracies to account. Senate Bill 607 would be a radical and potentially disastrous shift in California policy

at a time when our residents desperately need environmental and public health protections. Notably, CEQA has been in place for 50 years, as California ascended in rank to become the fourth-largest economy in the world. (See Favorini-Csorba, Bill Analysis - SB-607 California Environmental Quality Act: categorical exemptions: infill projects, (Sen. Local Government Committee, Apr. 30, 2025), p. 6.)

California’s prosperity must not lead its elected officials to abandon the state’s most vulnerable populations, leaving them unprotected and overburdened. Senate Bill 607 would do just that.

Finally, SB 607 would create legal uncertainty, thereby delaying project approvals and increasing financial costs borne by agencies and courts. The bill’s new legal standard for environmental review would create significant burdens for state and local officials attempting to determine how to satisfy its never-before-applied rules. Further, because the bill would undermine CEQA’s requirements to mitigate projects’ impacts, it would impose new duties on local governments, which would be forced to cover the costs—poten-

tially amounting to billions of dollars. More generally, SB 607’s ultimate cost would fall on residents throughout California. Unwanted industrial, commercial, and other types of facilities could pop up in local communities with no notice of potential environmental effects and no opportunity for public input on whether their environmental review is sound.

CEQA is vital in protecting California’s communities from adverse impacts. Focusing on the time needed to carefully examine and mitigate harmful projects fails to encompass the essential role CEQA plays in protecting the health and quality of life of the people and communities that will be impacted. We urge the Legislature to reject Senate Bill 607.

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