

The Brower Dellums Institute for Sustainable Policy Studies and Action (BDISPSA) explores Nature and Human Nature at scales from the wellbeing of a young child, to the social formation of our cities, to how we plan sustainable and thriving global outcomes for our human enterprises.

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The Institute helps initiate and manage funded community-based projects and conduct action research which integrates multiple sectors, primarily at local levels. It hosts local, regional and international conversations through informal meetings, seminars, conferences, courses and publications.



Project Description

The Water Management and Greenway Access Community Involvement Plan, launched by BDISPSA in 2017, works with adult and youth residents of Sobrante Park, Columbia Gardens, and Brookfield Village to investigate, understand, and describe water needs, and identify a range of possible solutions through surveys, school classes, community workshops and tours. With other partners, this project hired local residents to develop strategic plans which integrate the whole pattern of needs and assets. Specific project grant applications were developed by a neighborhood working group.

Background on Deep East Oakland

Demographics

The total population of Oakland is 412,040. This David R. Brower, Ronald V. Dellums Institute for Sustainable Policy Studies and Action project lies within the general area of the East Oakland Neighborhood Initiative, which contains six adjoining neighborhoods with a total population of under 50,000, including the three communities that were the focus area of this project: Sobrante Park, Columbia Gardens, and Brookfield Village. Several census tracts are in the highest earthquake shaking category as well as in the flood pathway of a Chabot Dam failure. The area is on the front line of the climate change effects of flooding from sea level rise as well as saltwater intrusion floating legacy toxins into homes.

The census tract that includes Columbia Gardens falls in the 97th overall percentile of CalEnviroScreen 4.0, which is used to identify communities with disproportionate pollution burden from multiple sources in California. The census tract of 4,687 people is 53.5% Hispanic, 34.9% African American, 4.8% Asian American, 4.7% other, and 2% white. It falls into the 92nd percentile for pollution burden (including the 92nd percentile for diesel particulate matter; 82nd percentile for traffic, 97th percentile for lead from housing as well as groundwater threats; 95th in cleanup sites, hazardous waste, and impaired waters, as well as 78th for solid waste), and 94th percentile for population characteristics (including the 100th percentile for asthma and 98th for low birth weight).

The census tract that includes Brookfield Village falls into the 94th percentile of CalEnviroScreen 4.0. The census tract of 2,490 people is 59.2% Hispanic, 27.9% African American, 5.8% other, 4.4% Asian American, and 2% white. It falls in the 79th percentile for pollution burden (including in the 94th percentile for diesel particulate matter, the 98th for traffic, 99th for lead from housing, 93rd for cleanup sites and 87th for impaired waters), and the 96th percentile for population characteristics (including the 100th percentile for asthma, and 96th for housing burden).

The census tract that includes Sobrante Park falls into the 83rd percentile of CalEnviroScreen 4.0. The census tract of 3,672 people is 57% Hispanic, 31% African American, 6.5% Asian American, 2.9% other, and 2.5% white. It falls in the 83rd percentile for pollution burden (including the 99th percentile for traffic burden, 97th for cleanup sites, 93rd for lead from housing, and 87th for impaired waters), and the 86th percentile for population characteristics (including the 96th percentile for asthma, 97th percentile for low birth weight, and 88th for education).

History of Environmental Injustice and Inequity in Deep East Oakland

The Deep East Oakland neighborhoods of Sobrante Park, Brookfield Village, and Columbia Gardens are located on Oakland's southern border, defined by San Leandro Creek near the Oakland Airport, the Coliseum, and San Leandro Bay. Sobrante Park also houses the Sogorea Te' Land Trust of the Confederated Villages of Lisjan / Indian People Organizing for Change. This area is classified by the state's definition to be severely disadvantaged / disadvantaged communities (80% / 60% of the Median Household Income). They are the most impacted neighborhoods in the Bay Area according to Cal EnviroScreen 4.0 and have a lower life expectancy than the broader City of Oakland. These communities have historically been under-resourced and impacted by redlining, freeways, and isolation from other parts of Oakland. There is competition among these areas for funding, resources, and shared public spaces. Illegal dumping and trash have been left on neighborhood streets.

The area was built up during and after World War II with housing to sell to service members and war workers. These neighborhoods then experienced white flight in the 1950s and 1960s, as many white families left, leaving behind a tight-knit and increasingly African American community with a thriving business center in the Sobrante Park area. Older residents describe their childhoods as a safe suburban life when they could be out all day in the neighborhood and exploring the open spaces along the creek as long as they got home by dark. They remember a full range of local African American-owned businesses, including a doctor who would make house calls. There was a vibrant music culture. However, by the late 1960s, the thriving business center was waning due to the drug trade brought in by federal agencies and urban renewal which bulldozed many of the smaller commercial buildings. Home financing from the GI Bill had generated a class of “white” European-looking families to purchase and renovate homes and businesses. Because of real estate restrictions, most houses and remodeling loans were not available to African Americans. Undesirable business types like auto dismantlers were zoned into the area, many directly along the “one way in, one way out” entrance to Sobrante Park. Many stores shut down or moved elsewhere. The grocery store at the entrance of the Sobrante Park neighborhood burned down in a fire.

With the advent of affirmative action and the war on poverty, wealthier families slowly migrated out of town, assimilating more into the mainstream. As a historian of an African American church in Oakland said, “Some churches went from ‘how can we help our community’ to ‘look how financially successful we are.’” During the foreclosure crisis, many community members who had lived in Sobrante Park for much of their lives lost their homes, and now more community members are renters. In recent years, the demographics have shifted, and the area has become an increasingly Latinx community.



Sobrante Park Fair community outreach, July 2021.

Photo courtesy of BDISPSA

Community-Identified Strengths and Assets

The rare assets of a flowing open creek, proximity to the bay, views of the hills, seven schools, a number of concerned, supportive and non-system entitled community members, some concerned businesses, agency and school staff, multiple skills, creativity, strong family ties, mature tree cover, and multiple agencies working in the area are potential pre-conditions for these neighborhoods to flourish. Some residents, who have been able to, have chosen to stay in or return to the neighborhood.

The communities of Sobrante Park, Columbia Gardens, and Brookfield Village have many places of worship and community organizations taking the lead to support their community. These maintain a spirit of taking care of one another, cultural events, community organizing and political action. Despite historically being underserved, the Sobrante Park neighborhood has retained an active base that, in 1968, banded together to build Tyrone Carney Park — named after a young Black resident who died in the Vietnam War — in the same spot where the grocery store had burned down earlier that year. The park was subsequently upgraded, but after a drug-related killing, the park was shut down. Funds allocated to re-open and manage the park were re-directed in 2012 by the District’s Council member at that time to the pay-for-services regional East Oakland Sports Center.

The East Oakland Boxing Association was founded in 1987. Athletics, after-school programs, tutoring, job readiness, summer paid internships, and a roof rainwater-fed organic garden were developed. Founded in 2006, the Sobrante Park Resident Action Council developed a block-by-block and phone tree outreach system, the Sobrante Park Youth (SPY) program, Health and Resource fairs, family/school programs, and a Time Bank for trading skills. In 2006, the City of Oakland Redevelopment Agency provided funds for landscape architect Walter Hood to draw plans voted on by the community

In 2014 Sobrante Park community members, to prevent further illegal dumping, organized a community project to install a partial barrier to a city street that had become a junkyard (Dirks, 2015). Later, a community mural was added. Funded by the Alameda County Health Department, the school psychologist at Madison Park Academy High School worked with students to create an anti-dumping campaign.

The East Oakland Collective was formed in 2016. It provides economic development, civic engagement, planning, and homeless services prioritizing Black residents.

Working with the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, the Sobrante Park Resident Action Council has received State funds to rebuild Tyrone Carney and Sobrante Mini-parks. BDISPSA is supporting community engagement for the designs.

In the heart of Deep East Oakland, Lisjan is a traditional village site and the first piece of land rematriated to Sogorea Te' Land Trust/Indian People Organizing for Change within the territory of Huichin. This site was deeded for rematriation by Planting Justice, a nursery that trains and hires locally.

Lisjan is home to the first arbor, a Californian Native ceremonial space, in this territory in over 250 years; a symbol of Ohlone peoples' resistance and strength in the face of colonial adversities. Here Sogorea Te' Land Trust/Indian People Organizing for Change operates out of a standard-sized shipping container named Jakelin, in memory and honor of Jakelin Caal Maquin, a Q'eqchi' (Guatemalan) baby that passed away unjustly while in the custody of US border patrol. The work at Lisjan, and at each site, is for the future of Indigenous youth.

Current water-related funding has had a multi-year history. In 2008 the David Brower, Ronald V. Dellums Institute for Sustainable Policy Studies and Action (BDISPSA), in partnership with Merritt College Environmental classes, having visited and studied the San Leandro Creek watershed, began to support a planning effort to envision community access to a restored San Leandro Creek with a trail that would connect the Martin Luther King, Jr. Regional Shoreline park eastward through the urban areas into the Regional Parks in the hills.

Founded in 1969, originally named the Berkeley Creators Association Educational Foundation, BDISPA was re-named after the Association advanced a 1976 Noble Peace Prize nomination for the mainstream environmental icon, David Brower by the social justice icon, Ronald Dellums for the purpose of diversifying the environmental movement. In corroboration of its research on the psychological aspects of peace and violence, the organization also helped initiate the local crafts sales on Telegraph Avenue, now in its 5th decade. The organization funded public mural projects by artists from the Black Arts Movement. In order to fill the small-scale economic development gap, the organization piloted locally designed and built public furnishings through several Berkeley city agencies. Scholarships were provided to its wilderness backpacking camp for youth recommended by the Black Panthers Community School. In 1974, the youth from the backpacking camp installed one of the first restorations in the East Bay Regional Parks since the 1930s and '40s Works Progress Administration. In 1993, it supported the Ecological Restoration degree at Merritt College, the first in the nation. These experiences have provided a base for the current BDISPSA partnership projects in East Oakland.

The community outreach for this DACTI project was based on BDISPSA's experience as a member of the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water and the North Richmond Shoreline Alliance, as well as lessons learned from the Richmond Greenway. In conjunction with the Merritt College Environmental Management and Technology Program, BDISPSA researched and developed aspects of community participation in neighborhood-scale urban planning, informally referred to as "Re-Villaging the City". In 2010 the Oakland Redevelopment Agency funded the multiple partner Green Works Development program based on designs coming directly from the community. This Sobrante Park design-build hands-on education youth program was the pilot project for the 2017 BDISPA grant application to the California Resources Agency for the San Leandro (Lisjan) Creek Greenway. In 2018 the Resources Agency awarded the \$4.1 million implementation grant for the Greenway trail to the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District on behalf of the community. BDISPA arranged the use of Tribal Involvement Best Practices (Ortiz, Beverly) in the park furnishings design of a ceremonial circle and traditional, food, health and fiber plants in the trail vegetation plan, and to include Lisjan history and current activities in the interpretive signage and virtual tour application being developed.

A number of studies and publications have supported the pre-planning for this project and for the San Leandro (Lisjan) Creek Greenway. Following the 2008 and later site visits, BDISPSA linked with Friends of San Leandro Creek. With the lead of East Bay Regional Parks Director, Doug Siden, the San Leandro Creek Alliance was formed. In 2015, the City of Oakland funded an opportunities and constraints Stakeholder Vision study by BDISPSA, followed by a partnership with Rails to Trails Conservancy for the CalTrans-funded San Leandro Creek Master Plan study (City of San Leandro, 2017). BDISPSA published community photography book, *A Walk Along San Leandro Creek* (www.browerdellumsinstitute.org 2017). Initiated by BDISPSA, the East Oakland area was chosen for a study by Rockefeller funded Resilient by Design Challenge in 2017 and 2018. There were 1994 design studies for upstream public access by the University of California College of Environmental Design as well as a scientific study of the Rainbow Trout population.

In 2016, BDISPSA applied the re-villaging concept to East Oakland as a connecting-the-dots process between the intersecting sectors of health, the built environment, environmental health, private and public enterprises, and policy into a Whole Oakland Plan concept from which each, otherwise siloed, sector would consider their effects on, responsibility to, and multi-benefits of every other sector.

To maintain and use public spaces and create training and employment, the Stewardship, Programming, and Safety concept was piloted with a first Communications Hub circle at Madison Park Academy focused on the use of the adjacent creek.

In 2017, the East Oakland Neighborhood Initiative (EONI) was formed between 12 East Oakland neighborhood organizations, including BDISPSA, to develop a new vision for East Oakland neighborhoods historically impacted by redlining, injustice, and divestment. After co-developing and submitting an application, partially informed by the Whole Oakland concept, to the California Transformative Climate Communities Planning Grant (TCC) program. EONI was selected as a recipient in 2018. The grant financed a year-long, community-led planning cycle for six neighborhoods in Deep East Oakland which included Sobrante Park, Brookfield Village, and Columbia Gardens. Resulting in the EONI five key goals that shaped the planning process:

- Reduce greenhouses gases;
- Prevent displacement;
- Improve public health;
- Build economic empowerment; and
- Plan by and with the community.



Madison Park Academy and Sogorea Te' Land Trust/Indian People Organizing for Change (IPOC) visit San Leandro Creek, August 2021.

Photo courtesy of BDISPSA

The EONI process centered around multigenerational people power and knowledge, as well as non-system-entitled underestimated community self-reliant assets, to drive for deeper community involvement in planning and maintaining its own future.

The EONI process empowered community-based organizations, resident leaders from each of the six neighborhoods within the project area, and City officials to co-create the 'Better Neighborhoods, Same Neighbors' community-led resilience plan (City of Oakland website) for an implementation funding application. The San Leandro Greenway CNRA funding provided part of the matching funds for the \$28.2 million grant which was awarded from the Strategic Growth Council TCC funding in 2020.

Based on previous work, the community-led resilience plan advanced six projects for implementation. One of these is for the operation and maintenance of part of the San Leandro Creek Urban Greenway by the East Bay Regional Park District which is funded to provide a full-time Park Ranger and a Naturalist once the Greenway is complete.

The San Leandro Creek Urban Greenway project creates continuous safe route access for the public with key community gateways. It provides connectivity to multiple community assets, including the Martin Luther King, Jr. Regional Shoreline, regional parks, nearby schools, and the Planting Justice nursery, which provides organic and health food and food-producing plants available to the community. 2,000 trees will be planted throughout the project area to promote healthier surroundings. Co-Applicants Black Cultural Zone, Planting Justice, and East Bay Permanent Real Estate Collaborative plan to support each other in their community engagement, displacement avoidance, and workforce development efforts to form a Small Business Alliance and stabilize housing through Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) housing production, while creating jobs in construction, community greening, and bike maintenance and repair.

BDISPSA will work in collaboration with the funded groups to continue the aligned community engagement hub circles and fulfillment of the San Leandro Creek Urban Greenway community designed and built park furnishings, culturally relevant interpretive signs, an interactive virtual tour app, and native vegetation. BDISPSA has advanced a community real estate ownership concept as part of anti-displacement efforts as well as part of a strategy for providing housing for the currently homeless.

Summary of Outreach and Education Efforts

The needs assessment work built upon years of discussions about community priorities. BDISPSA conducted surveys through a variety of means including social media, websites, and approximately 115 outreach events, and integrated input from other planning processes including the East Oakland Neighborhood Initiative, San Leandro Creek Greenway Project, and Sobrante Park Resident Action Council (SPRAC). BDISPSA also collected data from tours, site visits, and door-to-door surveys. BDISPSA hosted interns to conduct outreach, create a community stewardship network, and connect youth with local artists and nature. Overall, BDISPSA has collected roughly 560 counted responses through its outreach.

BDISPSA hired its own staff as much as possible from residents and people who work in the project area. The Institute chose community partners, when possible, from neighborhood organizations. This strategy provided in-house local knowledge and met the community goal of providing jobs.



Interns and staff at Akoma Market conducting outreach for Communications Hub, Tap Water Quality testing, and Creek access, July 2021.

Photo: Courtesy of Brower-Dellums Institute for Sustainable Policy Studies and Action

Source	Timeframe	Responses**
San Leandro Creek Greenway Project Water Survey Data	Sept 2019	21
2008-2015 Stakeholder Vision Report (New analysis for this report)*	2008-2015	403
Sobrante Park Resident Action Council and In-Advance Creek Survey	Aug 2019	61
Table top comments from tour and charrettes	Aug 2019	68
Higher Ground observations (Four different elementary schools, Athenian academy) and from 8/23/19 meeting notes at Planting Justice	Aug 2019	41
GRAND TOTAL (161 new responses; 403 re-analyzed)		564

* Re-analysis of data from a previous study

** Responses may be single response or full survey response depending on source (see lessons learned)

Needs Assessment Findings

The highest priority issues identified through the needs assessment are:

- Illegal dumping
- Safety
- Jobs
- Flooding
- Polluted water
- Lack of investment in water infrastructure
- Overall lack of investment in Deep East Oakland
- Homelessness

In general, responses prioritized park space and walking, illegal dumping, food, safety, flooding, education, and clean water. The focus of respondents was on 1) health, safety, jobs, education/culture (50.3%), and 2) nature and restoration (49.7%).

BDISPSA found that needs-based quantitative questions, especially those which contained a question which included “problem” or “concern,” yielded a list of health and safety worries as one might expect.

Quotes from community members who took part in the needs assessment process:

“Everything flows into the water ... illegal dumping is an issue. ...Deep East Oakland hasn’t had the same reinvestment as other parts of Oakland that have more wealth” —Anonymous, East Oakland Resident

“Lines in my neighborhood flood during rain season.” —Desmond Iman, East Oakland Resident

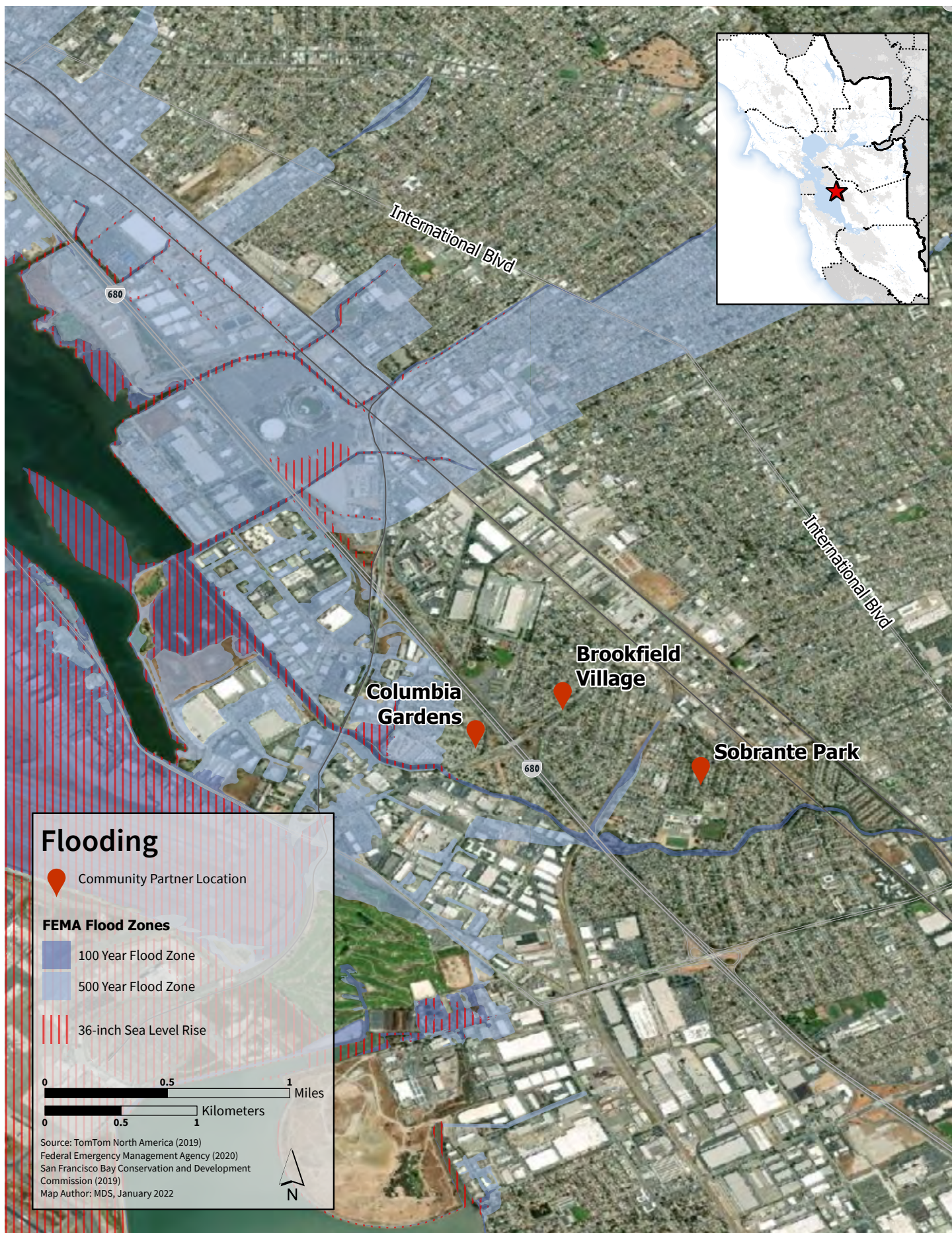
“My concern is safe drinking water that is not mixed and re-cleaned with polluted water.” —Burgers + Design Participant

Participant Responses by Category



The qualitative conversations over the 14 years BDISPSA members have been working in Deep East Oakland have been more successful in yielding actionable projects. One of the first questions asked by a third-generation community leader was, “Are these projects going to bring in jobs and protect our homes? That is what our community wants.” This led to BDISPSA’s local hire strategy in its own staff and, as much as possible, to bring the budgets of projects directly to residents. State and local contracting and payment laws are barriers to hiring locally, even if the funds are meant to benefit under-represented communities.

BDISPSA also found that standalone water-related questions, if isolated from all the other elements of life like housing, jobs, aesthetics, education, health, food or culture, were difficult to imagine how to address. When these questions were placed as smaller elements in a larger context, combining resources in more upstream planning revealed itself as more feasible. The themes which came out of conversations or listening sessions were corroborated by the survey metrics. The conversations of those familiar with the neighborhoods indicated how to interpret the raw data. For example, asking people who were relatively recent residents who knew nothing or little about San Leandro Creek were more likely to imagine it as a problem. Those who had played in it as children were more likely to see it as an asset.



The bar graph below counts the number of times these words were used in questions related directly to creek water and street rainwater. They do not reflect the other priorities of the community.

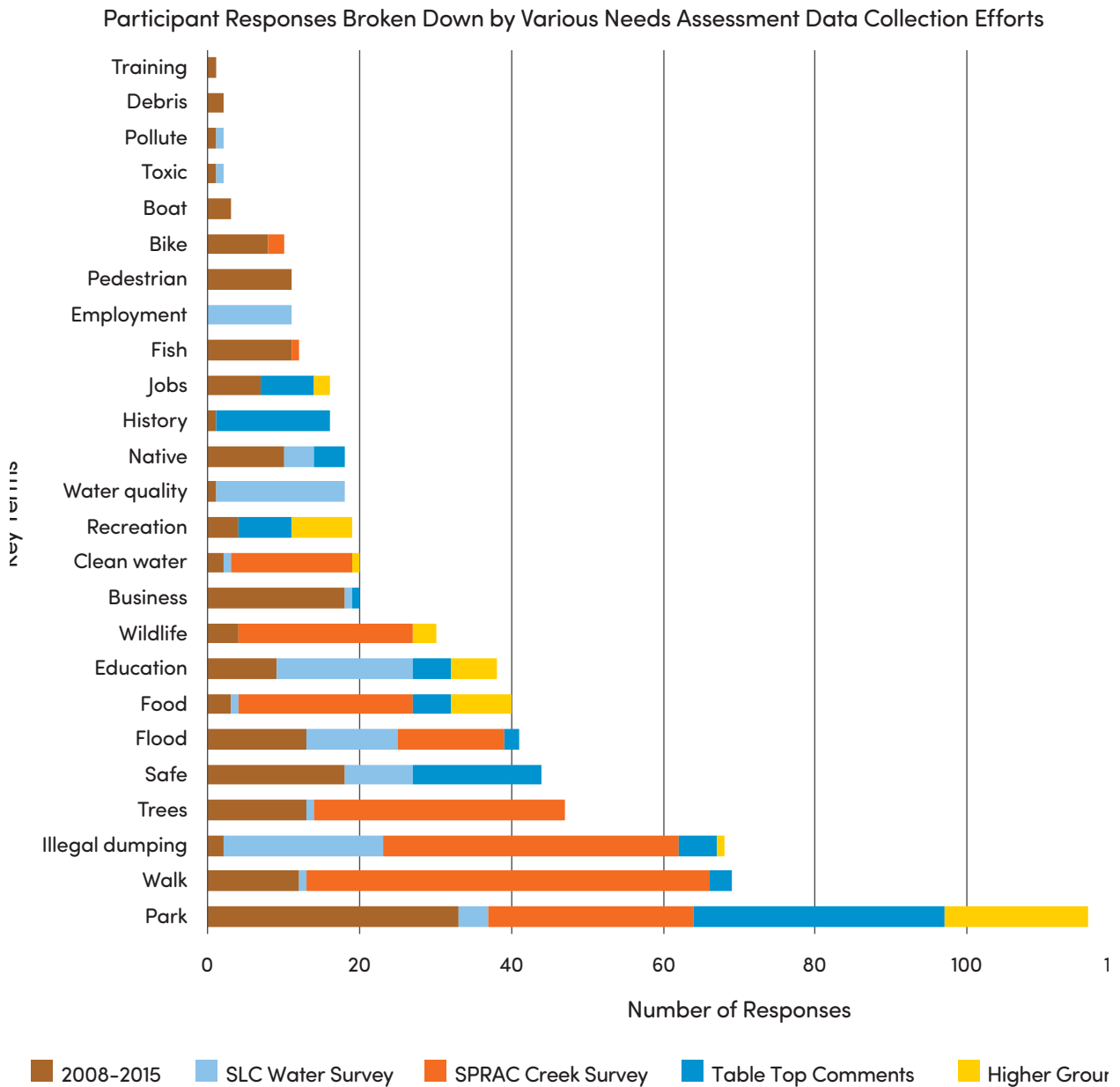






Photo courtesy of Brower-Dellums Institute for Sustainable Policy Studies and Action

Next Steps

From 14 years of working in these focus communities, and recording, compiling, and reviewing results with them, a vision is developing. Those who live and work in these neighborhoods look forward to developing an economically thriving, clean, safe, affordable, healthy and green place which reflects the local cultures. They look forward to easily walking and biking between neighborhood schools, work, transit, businesses, places of worship, events, and parks. They value immediate access to natural waterway areas and recreation. Clean streets, water and air are high priorities. They would like access to affordable home and business ownership and reasonable rents as well as employment, education and training. They would like to benefit from their area becoming a multicultural event, food, business and recreation destination without being displaced by regional improvements.

BDISPSA will continue to work with the community at the neighborhood level to identify and enhance assets to meet needs, envision and develop long term systems which serve immediate needs and, importantly, plan solutions upstream from symptoms which present as immediate problems. BDISPSA identified community stewardship, programming and public health and safety and the San Leandro Creek access community design/build as high priorities and as the ongoing community base for project development.

BDISPSA plans to work with the DACTI Program Tap Water Quality Testing effort to include the communities in Deep East Oakland and link outreach with the other high priority goals mentioned here. East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) is the water service provider for these communities.

Suite of On-Going Needs Towards Project Proposal Development

Pre-planning: Stonehurst Creek, Ratto Farm floodplain studies, green infrastructure links at and between resilience hubs (to be renamed with community input), water quality monitoring, maintenance and monitoring job creation, training and creating pathways to employment, green infrastructure safe pathways throughout neighborhoods near San Leandro Creek and flood prone areas.

Technical studies: Tap water quality in the area vs. individual home plumbing, research policing/ alternative community safety arrangement examples elsewhere, groundwater contamination and flooding, review of drainage infrastructure to identify inadequate drainage lines, sea level rise mapping, demographics, temporary & long-term housing solutions for, unhoused residents, refugee technologies and pop-up communities, i.e. AIDS Ride, Burning Man, Woodstock as examples of successful temporary relocation efforts in diverse conditions.

Community engagement: Review and interview Administration of Justice programs and self-monitoring programs like Community Ready Corps and Urban Alchemy as community partnerships, ambassador programs, and engineered drawings and construction of the Creekside Nature Outdoor Classroom amphitheater based on community input.

Tap water quality testing program: Include broad outreach with tap water and human right to clean air, water, soil, energy, housing, transportation, jobs, and health.

Capacity skills and awareness building needs: Community seminars on water, planning, sustainability, resiliency, 'missing middle' homeownership and neighborhood preservation and caretaking.

Rainwater Retention and Use: Rainwater catchment/greywater systems for greening, watering food gardens, flood control, and importantly, creating economic opportunities; and the opportunity for aesthetics of publicly visible waterfalls, water features and water sculptures as part of the catchment process. (e.g. Architect Eero Saarinen captured the rainwater off the roof of the NYC TWA terminal and directed it overhead of the entrance as a visually and sonically stunning stream splashing into a pool) Urban places are usually not recognized as an important part of watersheds. One student called the drainpipes and gutters "sidestreams". Fog harvesting can be researched. Even in LA, an official desert, half of their annual water use could be captured from in-city rainfall per Tree People research. The bio-filtration system developed by Nancy and Jack Todd showed how all of Los Angeles' wastewater could be processed in greenhouses within the city after which the plants can be harvested for multiple uses as well as for the valuable heavy metals they concentrate. Some of these technologies are decades to thousands of years old. Local water is a significant unused resource.

Additional Project Concepts

BDISPSA's other project concepts for Deep East Oakland in development:

- Neighborhood-based stewardship programs to address illegal dumping and maintaining the San Leandro Creek Greenway
- Peer-to-peer taskforce for people experiencing homelessness
- Partner with the East Oakland Collective, among others
- Groundwater analysis/experiment work with Dr. Kristina Hill at UC Berkeley
- Collaborate with Oakland Department of Transportation and Oakland Dept of Public Works
- Expand and fund East Oakland Flood Watch Initiative (EOC) – informal, fun reporting call and response on Instagram stories and TV to collect community observations of where flooding issues are arising
- Outdoor recreation
- Urban farming/food sovereignty
- Partner with East Oakland Grocery Cooperative
- Affordable homeownership and community right of refusal
- Looking to build a real estate cooperative to increase local ownership

Project concepts specifically for IRWM Implementation funding:

- Ongoing community and multi-partner, multi-benefit communication, planning, and management both locally within Deep East Oakland and San Leandro Creek, and regionally throughout the Bay
- People experiencing homelessness in the creeks, compounded by displacement pressure
- Line P Stonehurst Restoration green infrastructure
- Purchase Ratto Farm for multi-purpose flood basin
- Fish passage in the San Leandro Creek main channel
- Creekside Nature Education Amphitheater

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