

Bringing accountability to S.J. Redevelopment Agency
By Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins and Dave Cortese

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Last week, a community and labor coalition announced a proposal to bring needed fiscal reform to the San Jose Redevelopment Agency's use of public dollars to subsidize private developments. This policy, the Community Benefits Initiative, would require a more inclusive and open decision-making process. Most important, it would require a specific assessment of the public's return on investment from the agency's use of taxpayer dollars.

In the belief that government works best when sunshine is allowed to illuminate the process, this assessment will allow all interested parties, from neighborhood groups to environmental advocates, from small businesses to labor organizations, to determine how the development will affect them and to make recommendations. It will allow the public to hold the agency accountable for its decisions.

When a project is proposed with a substantial subsidy, this initiative would require the agency and developer to jointly prepare a community impact report including the financial impact of the project, the number and quality of jobs, effects on the housing supply and whether the project helps meet community needs such as child care centers and open space. A second stage will create a process for recommending development modifications to better meet community priorities.

In this time of economic hardship, it should be clear to our critics that we must retire the failed policies of the past and ensure that taxpayer money is invested wisely. Instead of citing discord and churning out rhetoric, we invite them to join us in a meaningful discussion on improving the local economy and creating more accountability at the Redevelopment Agency. The agency is one of the best tools San Jose has to aid in local economic development. However, it cannot continue to operate without meaningful reform.

Our goal is not to stifle the agency but to help it succeed. A successful agency means positive outcomes for developers, the local economy, residents and working families throughout San Jose.

The Community Benefits Initiative will allow developers to succeed by creating certainty for their projects as well as allowing them a good return on their investment. Our proposal will bring developers together with community representatives to start talking early, create mutually acceptable goals and then come together to City Hall with a win-win package. The Community Benefits Initiative will encourage jobs that pay enough to allow workers to support their families.

Allowing communities to insist that their tax dollars subsidize quality firms that generate good jobs is a cutting-edge approach. The Community Benefits Initiative will promote

accountability at the RDA. It will put aside the moldy ideas of the past that allow the preferences of bureaucrats more credence than the wishes of taxpayers and working families.

Our proposal will once and for all bring public accountability to RDA. While we believe it is a constructive step forward, we recognize there are still questions regarding its specifics. That's why we've proposed a three-month public review, including town hall meetings throughout the city.

With the regional economy in decline, this is a time for everyone of good will to work together for fiscal accountability, good jobs and a more prosperous future. We shouldn't let those who incite discord for their own political gain stand in our way.

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