A Big Win For The Six Wins Coalition

by M. Paloma Pavel

It is 5 o’clock in the morning—I am awakened by the Amtrak train sounding its horn along the Richmond tracks, our local capillary in a national system of passenger and goods circulation. A long awaited day—I barely slept knowing months of work hang on the decision forthcoming from tonight’s meeting. Nearly $290 billion in transportation investments are on the table. Which future will win?

Peering out my window in the Richmond Hills, through the early morning light I can now trace the outline of those familiar San Francisco landmarks—Mt. Tam in the distance, the orange Golden Gate Bridge. But our community’s struggles and triumphs are also inscribed in this landscape—night flares from the Chevron Refinery, San Quentin death row protests, Angel Island—location of the Chinese internment, Alcatraz—an island, a prison, a reclamation by First Nation peoples, a tourist destination. The cargo cranes of San Francisco and Oakland ports—like huge birds—mark the location of goods shipment, union strikes, and dirty diesel protests. The bridge between Marin and Richmond, one of many landmarks of spatial apartheid—a connection in steel girders, a division in opportunity, race and class.

Our geography is likewise marked by transformation, innovation, and restoration—the Marin Headlands unmarred by expensive condos, commons in the shell of military outposts. Regeneration after fires in the Oakland Hills, rebuilding after the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

I hear the voices of the many peoples, rivers of them converging in the San Francisco Bay Area. First, Ohlone peoples with reed boats shuttling across the Bay, vast storehouses of fish and game. Then, a destination for immigrants and outsiders seeking a living in the extraction of gold. Then the Richmond shipyards exploding with economic activity during the war effort, Rosie the Riveter, a diversity of race, gender and class making new roots in this land of opportunity. The rivers of humanity are shifting, as the Bay Area becomes a region with a majority “minorities,” new patterns of power emerging—inner city displacement and the suburbanization of poverty. If this Bay could speak…

Now the phone is ringing, a whirlwind day—coalition members making outreach calls, strategy conference calls, preparation of handouts, updates to the agenda, reminders sent to our Six Win networks and to the larger community. We go over talking points, share strategy on our presentations—we will have three minutes each.

We gather in Downtown Oakland—near the Metro Center, which has become so familiar. Sandwiched between Oakland’s Chinatown, Lake Merritt and Laney College, it is a transit oriented development site, and a future priority development area. Our coalition members are arriving on foot, on bikes on BART on buses, in cars. Tonight’s meeting has been moved.
to a conference room in the Marriott to accommodate the large numbers expected.

This is the night—the culmination of months of negotiation, mobilization, attention to mind-numbing details. There is so much at stake. Looking around the room at the sea of familiar faces, I consider the transformational journey we have shared. We have made mistakes with each other; there has been misunderstanding, outrage and grief. We have learned better ways to communicate, we have found compromises and wordsmithing. We have struggled together to cultivate the unity we present here tonight.

It is 6pm. The agenda is long, and our vote may not come up for several hours. Dozens of activist groups have gathered. Together, we prepare for the long process. Our coalition members leave to eat in shifts, go home to feed their families and return to keep our presence continuous and strong—the latest in many brave strategies we have developed to stretch beyond our limits of time and money. We are learning how to hear and support each other's issues—how to create a larger whole that includes each of our self-interests, but generates something greater than their sum. We can push our creativity and our endurance further because we have built this trust with one other.

We hold up our orange signs—“We support an Equity Scenario” in Times New Roman on Xerox paper. This shared message, a simple expression of solidarity and unity across our various organizations and sectors, is a complex and phenomenal achievement in itself. Encoded within this simple sign is months of technical work, generating regional transportation and land use modeling from real community values.

It is 9:40pm. The room is thick with sweat and sharp with raw nerves. We have been in this same room, and others just like it dozens of times over the past months, watchdogging the process, inserting our comments, our objections and recommendations. But this time is different. This time, we have translated our equity voice into the system's native language. We have crafted a transportation-modeling scenario that could stand the scrutiny of the official professional and technical process—the EEJ (Equity, Environment, and Jobs) scenario.

The critical motion comes at 10pm. Supervisor John Gioia takes the floor, proposes that MTC and ABAG will evaluate our community-driven EEJ scenario in the Environmental Impact Report, alongside four of the five official scenarios. This would mean that one of the official staff-generated scenarios would be dropped to make room for this interloper, the EEJ.

How far have we traveled to be here with this proposal? It is has been a long learning journey—VMT, GHG, ABAG, MTC —so much alphabet soup at the beginning. We have grown together, sharing the tools each of our organizations has developed over the years—Power Analysis, one-on-ones, all day strategic planning retreats, education and advocacy days—teams of residents bringing our message to board members in all nine counties. All of this grounded in a foundation of deep listening—to our own deep longings, to one another, to electeds and staffers—because we understand our fundamental interdependence. To make One Bay Area for all, we need to work together.

And now here we are at this critical moment, waiting to see how much community groups can drive the discourse in an ambiguous public participation process, whether a government structure can be flexible enough to withstand the changing paradigm. Have we poured our hopes and dreams into a process that can not carry them? Or will we be able to squeeze our extravagant longing into the cracks of a rigid bureaucratic system? Will those long nights and endless meetings have been worth it?

The motion is seconded. We wait. The long struggle—how far we have come. The vote is called, the tension mounts, the votes are tallied. Can it be? Impossible—

The result is unanimous. MTC and ABAG will include the EEJ scenario.

For a moment, we are speechless. This is barely comprehensible, when only a few months before we had felt ourselves barely tolerated, an irritation to the process. Back when we were asking basic questions, playing catch
up, finding ourselves enveloped in bureaucratic exploration. Looking at the agency members behind their microphones, it is clear that they don’t know what this is supposed to be either. We are all navigating in the dark.

What does 290 billion dollars look like on a table? How does a community weigh in on its future? Wider highways to suburban communities? Bart connectors for wealthy airport travelers with no stops for underprivileged neighborhoods? …We are now at the table and proposing, not just responding, not just saying no, but reaching across the alphabet soup, across the maze of protocol and procedure and land use planning to make our voices heard.

A watershed moment for community organizing—The Six Wins campaign. We pour into the streets—it is like world cup soccer—screaming and yelling. We could not know at this moment that our exuberance would foreshadow yet another unprecedented outcome. At this point it is enough that we are in the mix, have earned a place at the table. Months later, after the scenarios were tested, we would be astonished to learn that the EEJ scenario outperformed the other scenarios on the reduction of GHG emissions. Now, the choice of including us has taken deep root. There is no going back.

What lies ahead? We are regrouping, gulping for fresh air and nourishment as we set our sights on the next horizon—implementation of this round, planning for the next round of transportation planning, building community resilience, and preparing for the next California-legislated program coming down the track...

We have unquestionably gained new skills, and we are passing them on. High School youth participated in this round, and they are teaching these skills to friends and colleagues who may grow to become our allies in the next round. As we interviewed Devilla Ervin at West Oakland Middle School, he spoke poignantly of his own transformation in this process; in brief: I did not know what this climate change stuff and SB 375 was all about. I then became a spokesperson. I learned to interview my neighbors and family. Now I am a teacher and beginning to rise up the next generation. Devilla is remarkable—eighteen years old. His life is forever changed by the leadership he developed working in the Six Wins campaign with the New Voices Are Rising project, where he forged an understanding of displacement of the African American community and a commitment to his own community in West Oakland. His story, and the stories of thirty others, form the core of this book: A collection of stories and reports from the frontlines, outlining successful strategies in coalition-building, and the context underlying it all.