

EAST BAY EXPRESS

Will Jerry Brown's Plan Spur Suburban Sprawl?

The governor's proposal to kill redevelopment agencies could block "smart growth" projects in urban areas and derail the fight against climate change.

By [Robert Gammon](#)

February 16, 2011

When **Jerry Brown** was mayor of Oakland, he argued forcefully for spending \$60-plus million in redevelopment funds on a large apartment complex in the city's Uptown district. The **Forest City** project, he contended, was the essence of transit-oriented development, also known as "smart growth." It's near the 19th Street BART Station and is along a busy AC Transit line.

Brown also argued at the time that the project would be a catalyst for more smart growth in the city's downtown core. When asked in a 2002 interview whether \$60-plus million was too much money, Brown said developer Forest City wouldn't build without it. If it didn't, Brown said, the site would remain "dead dirt" for another 25 years.

Brown was convinced that his 10K Plan for downtown Oakland also would fail without heavy spending from the city's redevelopment fund. Likewise, many environmentalists over the past decade have come to view redevelopment money as an important tool for urban areas to attract development and create more smart growth. They note that getting people to live in cities, near major transit hubs, while curbing suburban sprawl and long car commutes, is the single most effective way for fighting climate change.

But Brown's current plan as governor to eliminate redevelopment agencies could derail future smart growth in cities such as Oakland and Richmond. It also could sidetrack California's nation-leading efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Without redevelopment funds to help subsidize urban growth, developers are more likely to build in wealthy suburban areas where they'll have a better chance of obtaining a profitable return on their investments. "We're definitely concerned that the proposed budget will not allow us to invest and encourage development in our cities," said **Amanda Brown-Stevens**, director of programs for **Greenbelt Alliance**, an environmental group dedicated to limiting suburban sprawl.

Some environmentalists, in fact, are speaking forcefully against Brown's plan. "It would be horrible for smart growth," said Oakland Councilwoman **Rebecca Kaplan**, a former longtime member of the AC Transit board who has championed so-called infill development for the past decade. "Without redevelopment money, it will make it much harder to complete transit-oriented projects."

Oakland Mayor **Jean Quan** noted that the environmental impacts of Brown's plan include more than just the fight against global warming. She pointed out that efforts to clean up and rehabilitate brown fields — polluted urban areas — require redevelopment funds. Oakland also has made good use of redevelopment funds for affordable housing projects, providing workforce housing close to job centers. In addition, the city has used redevelopment money to build bike lanes on several major streets and construct and improve sidewalks and pedestrian walkways to

make the city more walkable. "Jerry's plan is really going to hit the biggest cities the most," she said.

For Brown's part, he contends that cities have wasted redevelopment funds on unneeded projects over the years. Indeed, his decision to spend \$60-plus-million on 665 apartments in Uptown may be a good example of such overspending. Now, Brown seems to be arguing that he's found the error of his ways. He contends that in tough economic times, government can no longer afford to spend precious tax dollars on redevelopment when education, health care, and social services are on the chopping block.

It's a tough argument for environmentalists to overcome. It pits services for children and the poor against the fight to slow climate change.

John Gioia, a member of the **Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors** who represents Richmond, believes the answer lies in reforming the state's redevelopment law. He supports urban infill development and smart growth, but points out that, over the years, the term "blight" has expanded to include suburban and rural areas that use redevelopment dollars to entice developers away from cities. "Yes, redevelopment has allowed us to build some very good projects, but should we continue to take money away from health care, social services, and schools to subsidize construction in downtown Lafayette?" he asked.

Gioia also notes that urban areas, particularly in the East Bay, often use redevelopment money to compete against each other, whether it's for a new Target store or a new housing project. It's all about increasing each city's tax revenues. But the rivalries can become fierce with developers playing cities off of each other, and driving up the price of redevelopment projects. It makes more sense, he said, to make regional decisions on the best way to spend scarce public dollars. However, he acknowledges that such decision-making would require substantial cooperation among cities. "It takes political will to do that," he noted.

As for the choice of spending public money on smart growth instead of on health care, social services, and kids, Kaplan and Quan contend it's a false one. They note that California still does not collect oil-extraction fees on big oil companies like other states do, and they point out that Brown has left the state's prison-industrial complex untouched. In short, Brown has other options for balancing the budget than killing redevelopment. "How is it that he can release a budget with no reduction in prison spending?" Kaplan asked.

Still, Kaplan and other environmentalists acknowledge that redevelopment in California needs reform. But they worry that the call for reform will result in redevelopment being eliminated completely — as Brown proposes. And they note that right now may be the best time for urban areas to invest in smart growth, when construction is cheap and young people are looking to stay in cities. "The next generation doesn't want to move to the suburbs," Kaplan said. "People want to live in cities. They want to get around by transit. But they'll move to the suburbs if they're forced to."