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Public-Sector Trades Members 'Function Almost Like First Responders' During Major Storms

Maintenance Workers, Plumbers, Others Kept City Afloat and Alive During Recent Record Rains

By Jacob Bourne
Contributing Writer

The nearly-month-long parade of cyclones that struck vast swaths of California in December

and January claimed 22 lives and cost the state an estimated \$1 billion (at least) in damage resulting from flooding, high winds, downed trees, and landslides. The disaster set records in several regions of the state, including San Francisco, which saw its second-wettest day on record, with 5.46 inches falling downtown on New Year's Eve.

While most Bay Area residents hunkered down and tended to their properties amid rising water levels and power outages, roughly 3,000 SF Building Trades members who do public-sector maintenance work were out on the job in full force. They fanned out across the City and throughout the Bay Area, toiling through the storms in often-dangerous conditions to help keep disaster at bay.

A Profound But Too-Often-Unnoticed Contribution

In many cases, members of the private-sector workforce are sent home during inclem-

ent weather the same way they were, for instance, during the pandemic. Conversely, during such emergencies, public sector workers are called directly to the front lines to deal head-on with the adversities.

"Public-sector trades members function almost like first responders during these events," said Field Representative Vince Courtney of Laborers Local 261. "There are hazards everywhere, and people die. Elected officials and union representatives need to understand the contributions of our men and women who are out there trying to make things safer and eliminate as many hazards as possible."

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San Francisco Department of Power and Water workers hand out sandbags at the corner of Marin and Kansas streets during recent storms.



In Our Element

The San Francisco Housing Element is the City's plan to build 82,000 units of new housing — 46,000 of them affordable — by 2031, in order to comply with state housing mandates.

This is the first article in a four-part series exploring multiple perspectives on the plan and its potential impacts on both the building trades and the City. This month, we hear from SF's community advocates.

To Meet Its Goals, SF Must Get Real About Labor Standards, Affordable Housing

Community Advocates Say Partnerships With Unions Will Be Critical

By Jessica Zimmer
Contributing Writer

Their ideas about ways forward differ in some cases, but housing rights nonprofits and tenants' associations throughout the City agree on one thing: Building and construction trades unions will be essential to a successful execution of the Housing Element. Leaders from these groups spoke at length about the plan and how they felt

the City would best be able to meet its goals.

Strengthening Labor Standards, Creating Opportunities

The Housing Element's stated goal of 82,000 new residential units built by 2031 is promoted by conversations that help tenants learn the value of union work and the housing needs of union members.

"One of the changes we talked about is creating a path-

way for strengthening labor standards," said Charlie Sciammas, policy director for the Council of Community Housing Organizations (CCHO). "That should involve more pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities that give San Franciscans a leg up in securing union-quality jobs like those at CityBuild Academy.

"In addition, we discussed the need to create the opportunity for workers — including

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INTERVIEW

A Conversation With Law Professor, Author, and Preeminent Labor Historian William B. Gould IV

By Robert Fulton





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building and trades workers — to be able to live in the communities they serve,” Sciammas said.

CCHO is a nonprofit coalition of 22 community- and faith-based housing developers and tenant advocates in SF. In recent months, its leaders have held extensive discussions about the Housing Element with the SF Building and Construction Trades Council and the SF Labor Council, the latter of which represents over 150 unions across the City.

The organizations came to know each other better by cultivating support for Proposition E, a November 2022 ballot measure meant to expedite affordable housing projects that met some specific guidelines.

“We wanted to make certain that developers would have to adhere to higher standards in exchange for the opportunity to streamline residential projects,” said Li Lovett, CCHO’s communications director.

That’s the baseline reason the SF Building Trades and Labor councils supported Prop E as well. And while nearly 54% of the City’s voters ultimately rejected the measure in last November’s midterm election, the joining of forces between SF’s labor councils and CCHO to support Prop E has resulted in a valuable relationship forged among the groups based on their common interests.

Pivoting Away From Luxury, Building Truly Affordable Housing

Regional and local advocates are now working to pin down how the City will ensure housing actually gets built — specifically the 46,000 affordable units stipulated by the Housing Element for residents with very low, low, and moderate incomes.

“Having strong wages and labor protections are necessities to ensure union workers can build and live in that housing,” said Shanti Singh, communications and legislative director of Tenants Together, an SF-based nonprofit dedicated to advancing the rights of tenants statewide to affordable housing. “In addition, affordable housing needs to be built citywide, not just in certain neighborhoods.”

Singh said the City needs to start

land-banking — targeting and acquiring land specifically for affordable housing.

“The softening of the real estate market during the pandemic has made it possible for the City to buy more sites,” she said. “The City can also consider new uses for public land it already owns. Both efforts will make certain that affordable housing is distributed equitably across the City.”

The concern is that if the building of affordable housing is left entirely to the marketplace of private developers, truly affordable housing will never materialize. Sarah “Fred” Sherburn-Zimmer is director of the Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco (HRCFSF), a tenants’ advocacy nonprofit. She believes the “needed things” the City put forward in past iterations of the Housing Element

barred from accessing federal, state, and regional affordable housing funding programs. SF could also suffer state fines of up to \$100,000 per month.

In August 2020, nearly 40 tenants’ and housing rights groups decided to combat inertia by forming REP-SF, a coalition to promote affordable housing that includes CCHO; HRCFSF; Tenants Together; People Power Media, an independent media outlet that seeks to empower marginalized communities and community-based organizations; and San Francisco Tenants Union, an SF-based volunteer-run organization that helps renters learn their legal rights. For close to two years, these member organizations worked to compile community-written plans into one single document: the Citywide People’s Plan for Equity in Land Use.

What Is the Housing Element?

The Housing Element 2022 Update is San Francisco’s housing plan for the next eight years (2022-2030) and the first one to center on racial and social equity. It will include policies and programs that express our collective vision and values for the future of housing in San Francisco. This update will determine what our housing needs are and how we will work to address them, defining priorities for decision making and resource allocation for housing programs, development, and services.

—The San Francisco Planning Department, excerpted from *SFHousingElement.org*

has resulted primarily in the construction of luxury units.

“We’ve been to many public hearings about affordable housing that never gets constructed [while] luxury housing continues to go up,” Sherburn-Zimmer said. “For years, the City has been catering to high-paid tech workers. Many of them are not living here anymore. We need to pivot.”

Providing Alternatives, Forming Alliances Between Labor and Housing Advocates

If the City fails to comply with the Housing Element, it could face some costly repercussions, including being

In November 2022, REP-SF’s member organizations demonstrated in support of the plan at City Hall. Joseph Smooke, cofounder of People Power Media, said rallies like these form alliances. The bonds guard against developers and politicians driving wedges between labor unions and the affordable housing movement.

“Creating and supporting the Citywide People’s Plan has showcased the amazing thinking going on in communities, including methods for labor unions to assist with protecting tenants from displacement and demolition,” Smooke said. “We need all hands on deck to ensure the City acts equitably.”

Jeantelle Laberinto, a Filipina com-

munity organizer and staff writer for People Power Media, said community advocates no longer want to fight “development by development.”

“This is our document, which presents an alternative to the San Francisco Housing Element,” Laberinto said. “Our communities have been dealing with issues of inequitable planning for decades. [We’ve] created community-led solutions for just as long, starting back with the Chinatown Community Plan in 1985. The Citywide People’s Plan shows a real pathway to realize the City’s stated goal of centering racial and social equity in the Housing Element.”

Leading the Way for All of the Bay

The City’s effort to build more housing will lead the way for other Bay Area cities. The obstacles for all Bay Area housing elements do not vanish beyond city and county limits, said Abram Diaz, policy director for the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH). A membership organization based in SF, NPH represents thousands of individuals and organizations, including affordable housing developers, advocates, community leaders, and businesses.

“As we collectively move forward toward construction of the 82,000 homes — and especially the 46,000 affordable homes specifically for our low-income and vulnerable community members — we need to extend conversations past San Francisco,” said Diaz.

Anastasia Yovanopoulos, a volunteer with SF Tenants Union, said future collaboration can also return to the idea of passing new city and state legislation.

“Adequate funding is a big concern,” she said. “Right now, the City is in a deficit. It doesn’t have enough money for housing, including affordable housing. All of us who advocate for affordable housing need to push the City and the state to solve the funding problem.”

Yovanopoulos said that maintaining, restoring, and adding rent-controlled units throughout the City could be part of the solution.

“It will help to improve the housing we already have. That way, current tenants, including union workers, will not have to leave,” she said. **OL**



Charlie Sciammas is policy director for the Council of Community Housing Organizations.



Li Lovett is communications director for the Council of Community Housing Organizations.



Shanti Singh is communications and legislative director for Tenants Together.



Sarah “Fred” Sherburn-Zimmer is director of the Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco.



Joseph Smooke is cofounder of People Power Media.



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