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Oakland's future: Growth or regression?

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On Nov. 17, at a conference called "Building Oakland for Everyone: A Summit on Jobs, Housing, and Justice," about 300 people from throughout the East Bay gathered at Saint Anthony's Church in Oakland to discuss how economic growth can benefit the poor.

This is an important issue, and represents a challenge facing Oakland at this critical juncture -- down one path is growth and prosperity and the revitalization that Oaklanders have sought for decades; and down the other path is a regression into stagnation and the continued decay of our social and physical systems caused by well-meaning people trying to "protect" the poor. The cacophony of voices in the room that day should be cause for concern for all Oakland residents.

We should be concerned about this gathering of "protectionists" -- union leaders, nonprofit activists and paid organizers -- not because of what was said, but because of what wasn't said; not because of who was there, but because of who wasn't there.

Wrestling with history

For over 40 years, policy makers have been cognizant that economic growth must support, not exclude, the blue-collar workers and their families, the city's fabric. Up until the Jerry Brown era, this meant turning away from private investors and other harbingers of "gentrification," and turning toward state and federal funds for support. But the state and federal government do not have, and never will have, enough money to give Oakland for affordable housing, jobs creation, and ultimately, to lift low-income residents from poverty. Nor are we able to squeeze enough taxes out of property owners. The result is aging infrastructure, poorly maintained parks, high crime rates, and insufficient services.

As Jerry Brown took office, Oakland still struggled with the persistent challenge -- to welcome outside investors, or fear the intrusion and close the borders to "protect" the poor. Brown acted boldly, and pushed his way through our worst fears of growth. The result has been dozens of cranes constructing thousands of housing units that has led to a retail renaissance recently featured in the San Francisco Magazine.

But as the floodgate to investment was bursting open, fear and apprehension was gripping the protectionists of Oakland. Groups such as Just Cause, Urban Strategies, Oakland Community Organizations, East Bay Community Law Center and the Central Labor Council spent the next eight years on the defensive, waiting for the pendulum to swing back toward policies to protect from this infusion of outside capital. With the election of Mayor Ron Dellums, it appeared to them that the

pendulum had swung in their direction. And the gathering of Nov. 17 was the full expression of a decade of frustration.

The ideas in the room were not bad ideas. Who can argue with "creating jobs for the poor" or "protecting the health of the poor" or "building housing for the poor"? The real problem is that some of the most important voices were left out -- the people with the money and the experience to continue Oakland's economic growth.

The mayor's challenge

For Oakland to continue moving forward, the investors and financiers have to be "at the table" of these discussions. To not do so will only result in the passage of policies that scare away the capital resources we need to continue to grow and prosper and make sure everyone benefits from Oakland's renaissance.

The challenge is now before Mayor Dellums. If he invites everyone to sit at the table of economic growth with him, then Oakland can truly become a model of how innovative economic policies and the renaissance of a tough, gritty city can benefit everyone, especially the poor.

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