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courtesy of  
Jan Janner

# Common Ground.

Coalition Building Between Environmental and Housing Justice Organizations for Sustainable Cities

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# Abbreviations Utilized in this Presentation:

Abbreviations are utilized for the sake of brevity on the slides.

- ▶ **PEH: People Experiencing Homelessness**

There are diverse perspectives on the most appropriate ways to categorize and describe homeless people. In this presentation the acronym for People Experiencing Homelessness (PEH) is used, this is both for brevity and to reinforce that homelessness is an experience, not a defining state of identity (Anderson et al., 2021).

- ▶ **CEJ: Critical Environmental Justice**

CEJ applies advocates for theorists across disciplines to analyze society in ways that support resistance to structures creating inequality, exploitation, and domination (Holifield, 2009).

- ▶ **NIMBY: Not In My Back Yard**

NIMBYism or, “Not in my backyard” thinking began in the 1970s and led to protestors fighting off proposals for undesirable land usages near their homes, neighborhoods, and local parks.

# Acknowledgements

- ▶ **Land Acknowledgement:** Doing my best to honor CEJ's principals, I would like to acknowledge that this conference is taking place on land that was once inhabited by the Coahuiltecan, Comanche, Tonkawa, and Lipan Apache tribes.
- ▶ Thank you to everyone here today to listen to my presentation for all you do to support the dignity and improve the life chances of PEH.



# My personal journey to becoming a scholar activist...

- ▶ I founded Mermaids for Clean Water in 2016 to try to make Austin's parks cleaner and safer. I wanted children in working class communities to play in their local creeks and to improve the habitat for wildlife.
- ▶ After noticing that much of the litter in both Mable Davis and Bartholomew parks in Austin were washing downstream from nearby encampments I decided to learn more about homelessness.
- ▶ I realized quickly that the solution to the issues with litter in parks had nothing to do with blaming or arresting PEH. I decided to attend graduate school to study environmental sociology.
- ▶ As the daughter of a formerly homeless veteran and a person who's experienced hidden homelessness due to a severe allergy to mold, I realize anyone can become homeless.



Mermaids for Clean Water, It's My Park Day cleanup at Bartholomew park, 2019.  
Photo courtesy of Lindsay Loftin



# The challenge of including affordable housing as a criteria for urban sustainability:

- ▶ There is currently no singular definition of what sustainability means. Nor are there finite criteria for what makes a city sustainable (Zeemering, 2014). Whatever the public says is sustainability, is sustainability.
- ▶ 70% of responding local governments were not providing support or incentives for affordable housing according to the 2010 ICMA national survey of local government action related to sustainability (Svara et al., 2013).
- ▶ A Q-Sort analysis of 45 of Baltimore's sustainability priorities revealed that the category of respondents who defined urban sustainability through a focus on environmental sustainability (water quality, conservation, etc.) were least likely to support the idea that assisting, "the homeless and those who lack adequate housing" or "support fair and affordable housing" should be included as sustainability priorities for Baltimore (Zeemering, 2014: 65).
- ▶ Sustainability programs put pressure on government officials to track and report on empirical indicators which are thought to demonstrate government effectiveness (Zeemering, 2014), for example: officials may perceive that fewer encampments of PEH in parks means the city is cleaner and therefore more sustainable.

# What is CEJ?

Review of CEJ literature yields four central understandings within CEJ:

- 1) The importance of addressing structural problems with grassroots driven structural solutions;
- 2) The intersectionality of inequality;
- 3) Support for a new more egalitarian economic system where industry is heavily regulated by democratic processes;
- 4) The socioecological indispensability and interdependence of all living things towards the creation of a sustainable future

(Angus, 2016; Holifield & Walker, 2009; Pellow, 2018; Shrader-Frechette, 2002).



# Why Critical Environmental Justice (CEJ) matters to your work!

The framing of homelessness matters, “Whether a circumstance such as homelessness is even presented as a social problem – that is, as something that needs addressing - can influence public opinion on action and policy formation” (Calder et al., 2011: 5).

Using a CEJ framework to describe solutions to homelessness invites additional collaboration between housing justice organizations and environmental groups, possibly even new city department support and funding opportunities.

Sustainability and CEJ require that the homeless community be seen as indispensable to society. “Radical indispensability is, “... countering the ideology of white supremacy and human dominionism and articulating the perspective that excluded, marginalized and othered populations, beings, and things – both human and more-than-human – must be viewed not as expendable but rather as indispensable to our collective futures” (Pellow, 2018: 26).

# A brief history of NIMBYism in Austin

- ▶ Bullard (1990: 144) described court victories by NIMBY environmental groups as responsible for pushing unwanted toxic industry facilities into Black neighborhoods saying, “NIMBY, like white racism, creates and perpetuates privileges for whites at the expense of people of color.”
- ▶ Bullard (1990) argued that the successes of White anti-toxics groups did not translate to less pollution, but rather to the clustering of facilities in areas with higher Black populations and lower economic stability like the Deep South and inner cities.
- ▶ NIMBYism can also be seen in Tretter’s (2013) case study of Austin, Texas’s environmental protections for endangered species and water quality. Developers and City Council members in Austin’s downtown area were pleased with the compromise of increasing density in downtown to avoid development on a sensitive watershed (Tretter, 2013). The tradeoff ultimately came at the expense of the displacement of PEH from downtown shelters. Density also catalyzed the process of gentrification in East Austin.

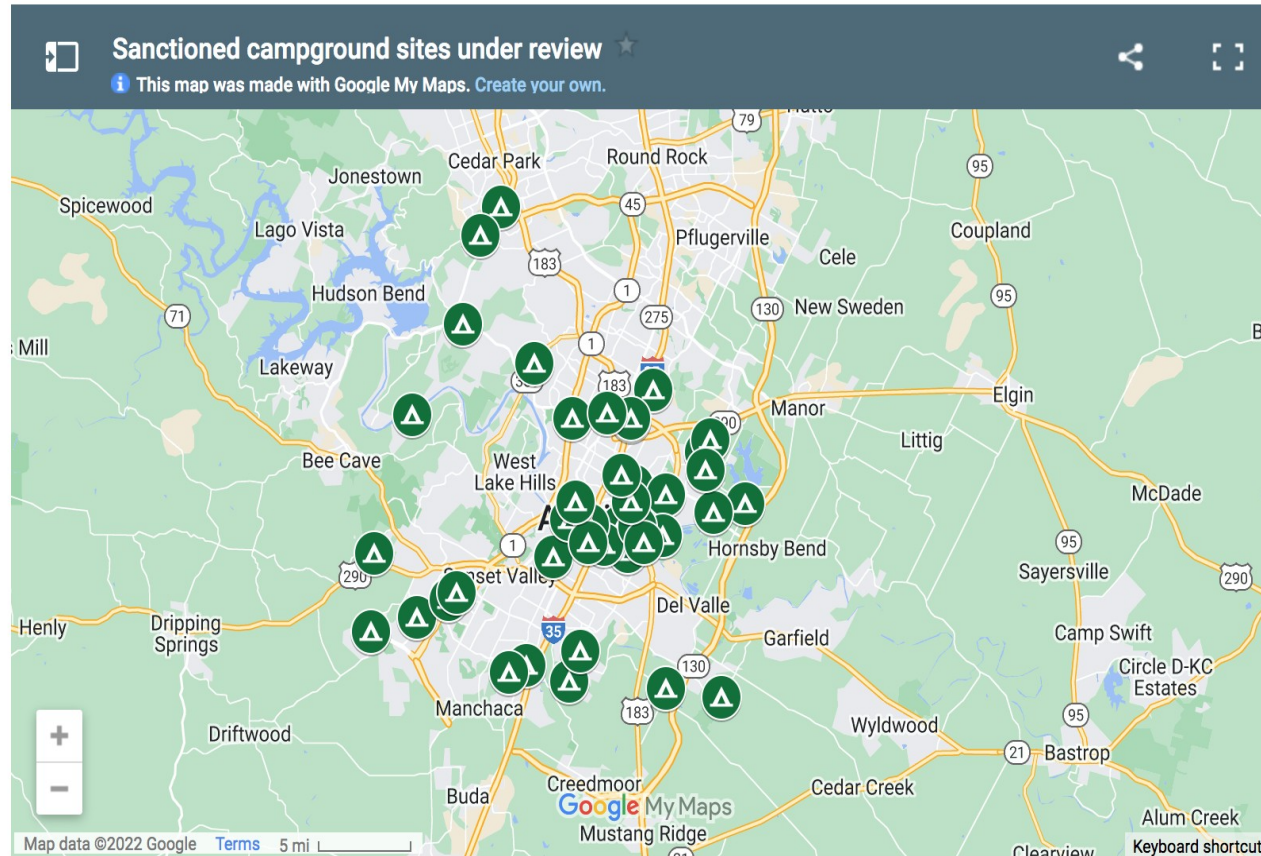


# Social Control Through NIMBY Camping

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city parks, vacant lots, and utility and public works facilities.



As you can see from this screen shot of a map of proposed designated camping sites for PEH after Prop B was reinstated, zero sites were proposed in the affluent, primarily white neighborhoods West of downtown. Many of the proposed sites would also impose massive transportation obstacles for PEH to access necessary social and medical services.

Image is a screenshot from <https://communityimpact.com/austin/central-austin/government/2021/05/18/updated-austin-parks-other-city-properties-make-up-preliminary-list-of-sanctioned-homeless-campsites>

# What is Prop B? Is it Constitutional?

- ▶ Proposition B, made it a Class C misdemeanor to, “sit, lie down, or camp in public areas” and prohibits, “solicitation of money or other things of value at specific hours and locations. (City of Austin 2021)”
- ▶ This is concerning because in 2017 the Office of the City Auditor determined that Austin’s homeless ordinances were potentially in violation of the Eighth Amendment (City of Austin Office of the City Auditor 2017).
- ▶ Violation of Austin’s city ordinances Camping (§9.4.11) and Sit/Lie (§9.4.14) often resulted in Class C misdemeanors and could result in a fine up to \$500 for each offence (Office of the City Auditor 2017). “The data indicated that for about 90% of the citations, the person failed to appear in court” (Office of the City Auditor, 2017: 4).



# Social Control through Tent Cities is Not CEJ



Image courtesy of Ben Sargent

- ▶ Goodling details disturbing evidence that tent cities may be serving the neoliberal state and not the people who actually reside in them through the act of “containment” (Goodling, 2019: 4).
- ▶ The amount of autonomy embedded in each tent city community model is a major determinant of if the tent city is serving the state or the homeless community (Goodling, 2019).



# Save Austin Now's Framing of Homelessness as an Environmental Issue Likely Helped Prop B Pass



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## Greg Casar's Camping Deregulation is An Environmental Disaster

The environmental impact of deregulated homeless encampments has been devastating. Those impacts include erosion, destruction of native vegetation, debris accumulation, water quality issues, habitat destruction, public health issues (including hypodermic needles and possibly E. coli fecal coliform bacterial contamination of the creek and its tributaries), and discouragement of public use of parks and green spaces.

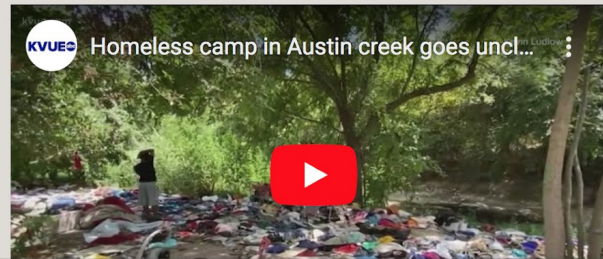


Image is a screenshot from <https://www.saveaustinnowpac.com/greg-casar-is-destroying-austin>

As of 9/2/22, if you visit this link

<https://www.saveaustinnowpac.com/greg-casar-is-destroying-austin>

you could see that Save Austin Now, a private interest group, is explicitly ~~framing~~ **framing** homelessness as an environmental issue such narratives through demands for sustainable solutions to providing affordable permanent housing.



# Who is enforcing Prop B in Austin?

According to the Office of the City Manager (2021), multiple City departments address PEH and encampments, including:

- ▶ Austin Code
- ▶ Austin Fire Department
- ▶ Austin Parks and Recreation Department
- ▶ Austin Police Department
- ▶ Austin Public Health, including the Homeless Strategy Division
- ▶ Austin Public Library
- ▶ Austin Public Works
- ▶ Austin Resource Recovery
- ▶ Austin/Travis County EMS and the Homeless Outreach Street Team (HOST)
- ▶ Downtown Austin Community Court
- ▶ Watershed Protection Department
- ▶ Citizens and community groups calling 311 to report encampments and PEH activities

# Coalition Building 101:

- ▶ 1. Choose your priorities: What are your top 3 priorities for ending homelessness? What could be added to link those priorities to environmental priorities and sustainability?
- ▶ 2. What barriers to action lie between you and environmental organizations? (Historical, political, monetary, legal, cultural?)
- ▶ 3. What does sustainability mean to you? What does it's opposite look like in Austin now?
- ▶ 4. What are you potential points of interaction between your organization and environmental groups? What facets of the complex problems of urban sustainability and ending homelessness intersect? Where? When? In which ways?



# Sustainability will require that environmental organizations and PEH advocacy organizations work together. Some cities are ahead on this!

- ▶ **The Environmental Council of Sacramento (ECOS) for example states,**
- ▶ “At present, the level and persistence of homelessness has emerged as the greatest unmitigated current challenge to the mission of our Habitat Conservation committee, Habitat 2020. Human suffering, public health and sanitation risks, and environmental degradation have become intolerable” (ECOS, 2018: <https://www.ecosacramento.net/2018/01/homelessness-is-an-environmental-issue/>)
- ▶ ECOS states that they have 4 main priorities, including demanding affordable housing, cleaning up parks and waterways, insisting cities provide adequate emergency shelter for PEH, and unprecedented cooperation across the region (ECOS, 2018).

# Beautification/Waste Management

- ▶ The Trail Foundation: <https://thetrailfoundation.org/>
- ▶ Keep Austin Beautiful: <https://keepaustinbeautiful.org/>
- ▶ Austin Creative Reuse: <https://austincreativereuse.org/>
- ▶ Plastic Reduction Project: <https://www.plasticreductionproject.org/>
- ▶ Pease Park Conservancy:  
[https://peasepark.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw08aYBhDIARIsAA\\_gb0enVESMj4PkuAoWo1p0AziM9m40kTMaMgrplhLZYPhxruNXJ9Wa7KgaAr3sEALw\\_wcB](https://peasepark.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw08aYBhDIARIsAA_gb0enVESMj4PkuAoWo1p0AziM9m40kTMaMgrplhLZYPhxruNXJ9Wa7KgaAr3sEALw_wcB)
- ▶ Austin Parks Foundation:  
[https://austinparks.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw08aYBhDIARIsAA\\_gb0dc\\_T95LTBWUDh3avOdYxvIVck-iDHrRccDm8O9SfC3JGqMIBbmxC8aAi7AEALw\\_wcB](https://austinparks.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw08aYBhDIARIsAA_gb0dc_T95LTBWUDh3avOdYxvIVck-iDHrRccDm8O9SfC3JGqMIBbmxC8aAi7AEALw_wcB)



# Community Gardens

- ▶ Fruitful Commons: <https://fruitfulcommons.org/>
- ▶ PEAS: <https://www.peascommunity.org/>

# Conservation

- ▶ Tree Folks: <https://www.treefolks.org/>
- ▶ Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club: <https://www.sierraclub.org/texas>
- ▶ Travis Audubon Society: <https://travisaudubon.org/>



# Water Quality

- ▶ Shoal Creek Conservancy: <https://shoalcreekconservancy.org/>
- ▶ Save Our Springs Alliance: <https://www.sosalliance.org/>
- ▶ Save Barton Creek Association: <https://savebartoncreek.org/>
- ▶ Clean Water Action, Texas: <https://www.cleanwateraction.org/states/texas>

# Children in Nature

- ▶ Families in Nature: <https://familiesinnature.org/>
- ▶ EcoRise: <https://www.ecorise.org/>



# Environmental Justice

- ▶ Ecology Action: <https://www.ecology-action.org/>
- ▶ PODER: <https://www.poderaustin.org/>
- ▶ ATXEJ - Austin Environmental Justice Team:  
<https://www.facebook.com/ATXEJ/>

# Suggested Reading List

- ▶ Systems Thinking for Social Change by David Peter Stroh
- ▶ Mean Streets: Homelessness, Public Space, and the Limits of Capital by Don Mitchell
- ▶ What is Critical Environmental Justice? by David Pellow
- ▶ Homelessness Handbook edited by David Levinson and Marcy Ross
- ▶ Community by Gerard Delanty



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# Photo Credits

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# Questions?



Photo courtesy of my mom circa 2012

# Suggested Ice Breaker:

Find two other people to work with. Facing your partners, making eye contact if it is comfortable to do so, take turns sharing from the following prompts. We will spend 10 min total doing this activity, be mindful of that when sharing.

- ▶ Do you have a special memory of being outdoors? What made that experience of being in nature special? Where were you? Who were you with?
- ▶ Do you have a special memory of a person who helped you during a difficult time in your life? What did they do that was specifically helpful? How do you honor their gift of kindness towards you in your life today?



# Instructions for a practical application activity:

- ▶ Using the questions from slide 14 of this presentation, take 20 minutes to self assess and journal about your own experiences and thoughts on those questions.
- ▶ Find 3 people in the room who do not work for the same organization as yourself. Take turns. One person will pretend to be an employee for an environmental organization. One person will be themselves, representing their own organization working to end homelessness in Texas. Discuss how you could possibly work together to achieve each of your goals under the umbrella of the term “sustainability”. The third will be an outside observer taking notice of the interaction and looking for opportunities for common ground that other two may be missing.
- ▶ Each person will embody each role for 5 minutes. Between switching roles, take 10 minutes to discuss what happened and take notes on your experience. At the end of the 10 minutes, resume in a new role.