

Can Pasadena become a 'city of justice?'

by Peter Dreier

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I sometimes wonder what the Prophet Isaiah would think about Pasadena. It was Isaiah whose words we just read this past Yom Kippur.

God, speaking through Isaiah, says, "Do you think the fast that I demand this day is to bow down your head like a bulrush? No! The fast I demand is that you feed the poor, house the homeless, clothe the naked, and break off the handcuffs on your prisoners."

In other words, it is not enough to feel guilty and ask for forgiveness. It is not enough to mouth platitudes about fairness, compassion and justice. We have to act on those beliefs.

We are a world-class city, well known for the Rose Bowl, our cultural institutions, colleges and our science-oriented institutions like Cal Tech and JPL. What many people don't realize is that Pasadena, with 146,000 people, is also a city with many problems -- poverty, violent crime, racial tensions and widening inequality.

Pasadena is proud of its history and has a strong commitment to preserve its older buildings. But I'm not sure it has the same commitment to protect its older citizens, or to provide for its young children, or to help lift its working poor out of poverty.

We like to think of ourselves as a compassionate city that cares about its needy. But are we really? What would it mean for Pasadena to be a "city of justice"?

There are five pillars that comprise a city of justice:

- 1) A city with a strong economy that fulfills the American dream of fair wages and benefits in return for hard work.
- 2) A city that provides decent housing for a wide mix of families from different income groups and diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.
- 3) A city with a first-class, well-funded school system that guarantees every student an opportunity to fulfill his or her potential.

4) A healthy city, where people can breathe clean air, where everyone, especially children, has access to health care and where people feel safe in their homes and safe in the streets.

5) A city with a strong sense of community, where people participate actively in their civic, neighborhood and religious institutions; where they feel their voices are heard by the political decision makers; and where people feel part of something bigger than themselves -- something transcendent, even spiritual.

How close is Pasadena to becoming a real city of justice?

Pasadena is the most unequal city in California. The income of households near the top (\$255,106) is 12 times greater than the income of those near the bottom (\$21,277). This is the widest gap among the 36 California cities with more than 140,000 people.

In Pasadena, the wealthiest 5 percent of all households -- those with household incomes above \$255,106 -- have over one-quarter (25.1 percent) of the all the income in the city. Among California's 36 largest cities, only Los Angeles has a greater concentration of income among the richest households (26.1 percent).

In contrast, the poorest one-fifth of Pasadena households -- those with incomes below \$21,277 -- combined have only 2.8 percent of total residents' income. Those in the next poorest one-fifth -- with household incomes between \$21,277 and \$46,375 -- bring home only 7.6 percent of Pasadena's incomes. Only in San Francisco and Oakland do the poor have a smaller share of the income.

Pasadena is thus a tale of two cities. Gentrification is exacerbating the gap between rich and poor.

Between 2005 and 2006, Pasadena's median household income increased from \$51,233 in 2005 to \$59,301 in 2006 -- a dramatic 15.7 percent boost in just one year. This jump in income is not because Pasadena's existing residents got big pay raises from generous employers. It is because the people moving to Pasadena are increasingly those with high incomes, while those with low incomes are being pushed out of the city. In other words, the city's prosperity is not being widely shared, but is instead pitting the affluent against the poor and working class for the city's scarce housing.

Since 1999, the number of households under \$10,000 has declined by 30 percent. The number of households with incomes over \$200,000 has increased by 54 percent.

Moreover, gentrification is not simply a matter of market forces. It is a matter of the city's public policy. Almost all the housing that our city government has been approving is expensive luxury condos and apartments.

This has been exacerbated by the accelerating number of affordable apartments being converted to expensive condominiums or being torn down by city-approved demolition. Condo conversions don't add any new units. They simply make the existing units more expensive, feed gentrification and push out the poor.

More than half (54 percent) of Pasadena's population are renters. Half of them pay more than 30 percent of their incomes for rent. Among low-income renters, the situation is even more serious. Among the 7,684 households with incomes below \$20,000, almost all -- 89 percent -- pay more than 30 percent of household income for rent.

But the shortage of affordable housing isn't confined to the poorest households. Among households with incomes between \$20,000 and \$35,000, 78.3 percent pay more than 30 percent of household income for rent. Gentrification may be good for a handful of developers, but it isn't good for most residents or for the city's business climate. Pasadena housing costs are skyrocketing beyond what most working families -- including schoolteachers, nurses and nurses' aides, bus drivers, security guards, secretaries, janitors, child care providers, retail clerks, computer programmers, lab assistants and others -- can afford.

When working families spend almost half their incomes for rent or mortgages, they have little left over to spend in the Pasadena economy, hurting local businesses. Moreover, local employers are having difficulty finding employees who live in the city. Long commutes into Pasadena exacerbate traffic congestion and pollution. This is a major reason for the decline in enrollment in Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) schools.

PUSD's declining enrollment and budget problems are due in large part to the displacement of the poor, not the flight of the middle class. Until recently, our city government took no responsibility for the declining enrollment and financial problems facing PUSD. They acted as though the city's development and housing policies had no relationship to PUSD's declining numbers. They acted as though the kids attending PUSD schools were somehow not the responsibility of city officials as stewards of the entire community.

As a political scientist, I understand this. City officials didn't pay attention to our schools because they assumed that the parents who send their kids to public school didn't vote. After all, about two-thirds of the children attending PUSD are poor or almost poor -- that is, they are eligible for free and reduced lunches. And a majority are students of color.

On the two issues that matter most to Pasadena's low-income residents -- schools and housing -- our city officials acted as though it was "not their problem." But, fortunately, that is changing. There is now a growing and broad movement in Pasadena to address these two issues.

In the last year, thanks to lots of grass-roots organizing by parents, teachers and community residents, city officials are taking some responsibility for the success of our public schools.

Another catalyst for this growing partnership between the city and the school district was a report commissioned last year by the Pasadena Educational Foundation. It was called "One Pasadena: Tapping the Community's Resources to Strengthen the Public Schools."

The report, by consultant Richard Kahlenberg, really struck a nerve in our community. It pointed out that Pasadena has more world-class institutions -- colleges, museums, theaters, hospitals and science-based businesses -- than any other city its size. If these institutions -- and the broader community -- got behind our public schools, PUSD could be a first-class school system.

In fact, our public schools are actually improving quite dramatically. In 2001, 14 of our schools had API scores below 600. Only three schools had API scores over 700. This year, 20 of our schools have API scores over 700, five have API scores over 800 and none have API scores below 600.

There are some incredible programs in our public schools around art and music (every school offers instrumental music, band and orchestra), science and math and the International Baccalaureate programs at Willard, Wilson and Blair.

Marshall High School was named by Newsweek as one of the 300 top schools in the nation. Our staff includes California's principal of the year and teacher of the year.

The school district has wonderful partnerships with the Huntington Library, the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Huntington Botanical Center. Recent graduates of PUSD high schools have been accepted at some of the nation's top colleges and universities.

But there's much more room for improvement, especially at our high schools, where the dropout rate and the number of students performing below grade level are unconscionably high.

The new superintendent, Edwin Diaz, and the school board are working well together and building on the successes. But they can't do it alone.

We urgently need to increase state spending for public education. Sadly, California ranks 42nd in the country in per-student spending. We spend \$6,765 per student. The national average is \$8,041.

We also need to get our city government to be a stronger partner with our school district. There are many ways that the city can support our school district and the 20,000 kids who attend our public schools. For example, the city could maintain the playgrounds and athletic fields, help manage the school libraries, provide school nurses, transport students to and from schools and help pay for after-school programs at every elementary school.

Many other cities do a great deal with and for their local school districts. To learn from these best practices, a number of local groups are sponsoring a public forum on "Civic Investment in Our Public Schools" on Sunday, Nov. 4, at the Pasadena Senior Center, at the corner of Holly and Raymond streets, from 1:30-3:30 p.m. The forum will include speakers from four cities -- San Francisco, Santa Monica, Long Beach and Burbank -- who will describe how they work closely with their public schools.

There's a growing political constituency to improve our public schools, address the shortage of affordable housing and address the widening gap between the rich and everyone else. That's what it will take to make Pasadena the city of justice that it can be.

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