

5-12-2006

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Recommended Citation

Goetz, Jill, "Golden Gate University's Environmental Law Clinic Celebrates Victory for Its Student Clinicians and Clients" (2006).
Press Releases. Paper 72.
<http://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/pressreleases/72>

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May 12, 2006

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Golden Gate University's Environmental Law Clinic Celebrates Victory for Its Student Clinicians and Clients

For 12 years, students and faculty with the Environmental Law & Justice Clinic at Golden Gate University School of Law have represented community groups working to close an aging power plant in the predominantly minority Southeast San Francisco community of Bayview-Hunter's Point. On May 15, the plant will close, and the hard work by the clinic and its clients will come to fruition.

Golden Gate law students and faculty have worked with Bayview-Hunters Point Community Advocates, Communities for a Better Environment, Greenaction, Our Children's Earth, the Southeast Alliance for Environmental Justice, and other organizations to shut down the Hunter's Point power plant, which opened in 1929 and is owned and operated by Pacific Gas & Electric Corporation. The facility is adjacent to public housing and is widely blamed for aggravating asthma and other medical conditions among local residents, especially children. It has also harmed marine life in San Francisco Bay because of a "once-through" cooling system that sucks water out of the Bay, traps aquatic life, and returns heated water to the Bay.

The power plant is no longer needed because a 27-mile, high-voltage transmission line carrying power from the Peninsula recently began operation.

Golden Gate law student clinicians working on the Hunter's Point project have prepared witnesses, pleadings, and briefs and engaged in administrative proceedings, court litigation and negotiations, while client groups have worked with governmental agencies to develop new, more sustainable approaches to energy reliability. The closure of the Hunter's Point plant marks a milestone in their collective efforts.

Promising Developments in Potrero

The Environmental Law and Justice Clinic is optimistic about another priority—shutting down the aging power plant located in San Francisco's Potrero neighborhood. In March the California Energy Commission terminated a proposal by Mirant Corporation, which owns the plant, to expand it, and the existing facility is slated to lose its state contract for electricity in 2007, when a new City-owned and "cleaner" plant is expected to begin operation. As recently as yesterday, May 11, the Regional Water Quality Control Board issued a shorter permit than usual for the facility and announced its intention to end the facility's use of Bay water for cooling if it still impacted the Bay, an additional nail in the coffin for the power plant. The decision against expansion and the impending loss of a state contract means the entire facility could close next year, according to the clinic's codirector, Professor Alan Ramo, who represented Bayview Advocates and Communities for a Better Environment at the hearing.

"We believe the ruling on the Mirant plant, combined with the closing of the Hunters Point power plant, marks the beginning of a revolution," Ramo says. "These are steps in the right direction towards a cleaner city. We can't be more pleased."

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About Golden Gate's Environmental Law and Justice Clinic

In 1994 Golden Gate was one of the first law schools in the country, and the first at any California law school, to establish an environmental justice clinic. The clinic is now the only in-house law school clinic in California with an emphasis on environmental justice. Working with two full-time professors, ELJC student clinicians directly represent environmental organizations and community groups in low-income and minority communities on real-life public health, toxics, and environmental justice matters. These services are offered for free.

The clinic has been recognized locally and nationally for its work on behalf of community groups and in the field of clinical legal education. It has received numerous awards and honors from the American Bar Association, San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and US Environmental Protection Agency. The clinic recently received the CLEA Award for Excellence in a Public Interest Case or Project from the Clinical Legal Education Association for its Southeast San Francisco Energy Project, which includes work on the Hunter's Point and Mirant power plants described above.

Other clinic initiatives include the Clean Air Accountability Project, which focuses on air pollution in residential neighborhoods located near industrial facilities, and the City Parks Project, working for equitable distribution of urban parkland resources.

For more information about the Golden Gate University School of Law Environmental Law and Justice Clinic and its initiatives go to www/ggu.edu/law and click on "clinical programs."

About Alan Ramo

Alan Ramo is professor of law and co-director of the Environmental Law and Justice Clinic at Golden Gate University. A graduate of Stanford University School of Law, he specializes in toxics in the urban environment and is a former legal director of Communities for A Better Environment. He has served as an advisory member of two Cal-EPA committees, as a consultant to the Department of Health Services, and on a landmark case enforcing Bay Area air pollution plans in the San Francisco Federal District court. He is a founder of the Western States Legal Foundation.

Professor Ramo is available to discuss the ELJC's involvement in efforts to close the PG&E plant in Hunter's Point and the Mirant plant in Potrero, along with the clinic's other projects and activities.

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Note to Editors: To contact Professor Ramo or any other faculty or students associated with the Environmental Law and Justice Clinic, contact Jill Goetz at (415) 442-6636, jgoetz@ggu.edu.