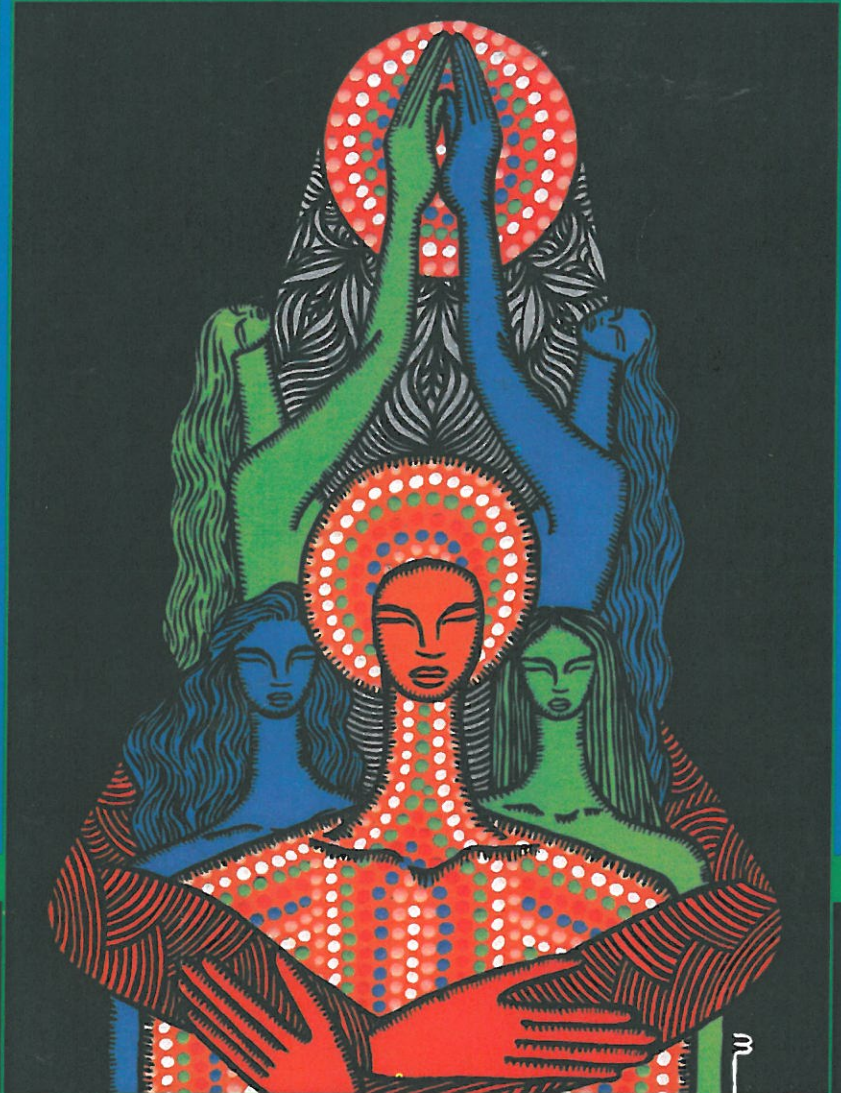
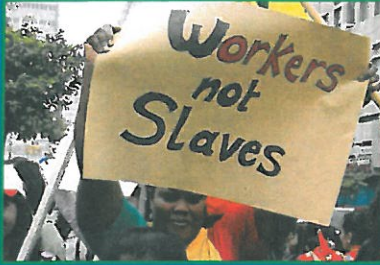


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# Racial Equity: New Cornerstone of Transit-Oriented Development

By Rebecca Saldaña  
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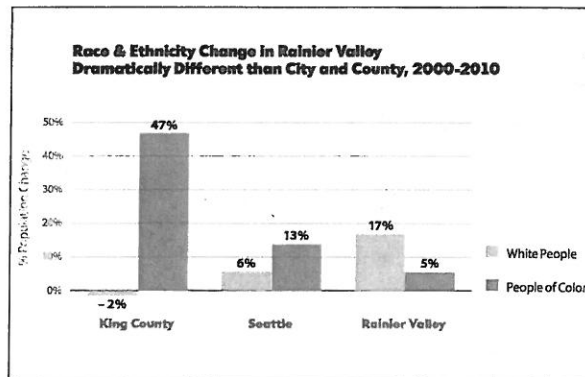
It's just after dawn when Naravisaya "Al" Les flips on the lights at his restaurant. There's a rhythm to his routine—the same one he watched his father play out 15 years ago. First, he kicks off his rain-soaked shoes on the front mat and walks across to the cash register. Next, he presses his palms down on the laminate counter and sighs deeply as he looks out at the cool grey Seattle morning before starting to count his cash.

The Les family has been in the restaurant business since 1987. In 1992, they became the first tenants in the newly developed Southeast Seattle King Plaza where they renamed their restaurant "Olympic Express" to highlight its multiethnic cuisine. Les is Cham Muslim from Vietnam and his restaurant is the only one in Washington State to serve halal Asian curries, teriyaki, noodles, and Mediterranean gyros. Olympic Express is located in the Rainier Valley neighborhood of southeast Seattle—the most racially diverse area in Puget Sound where 57 percent of households speak one of 40 different languages.<sup>1</sup>

Rainier Valley was the first community to receive a light rail line, which stretches 15.7 miles from SeaTac—the region's largest airport—to Downtown Seattle and cost the region's commuter transit agency, Sound Transit, \$2.71 billion at the first phase of construction. When construction began in the late '90s on this highly anticipated transit system many small business owners like Al suffered financial hardship owing to reduced customer traffic. Unfortunately, even after construction was completed, some local businesses continued to struggle.

## Light Rail: Heavy on Promises, Light on Delivery

Local government and transit advocates sold the light rail to Rainier Valley residents with the promise of investment in new transit-oriented development (TOD). In the minds of TOD advocates, people living in these areas should be able to get to a park, grocery store, and other activities on foot or by



hopping on transit that's no more than a quarter mile away. While the TOD model emphasizes walkability, density, and transit access, racial and social equity are not its cornerstones.

Despite the downturn in the economy, the light rail spurred some new TOD in Rainier Valley and in 2010, private developers built the area's first multi-family apartment building in almost 40 years.<sup>2</sup> Since then, several similar projects have entered the planning and construction phases. The tangible benefits of light rail and TOD for communities of color, however, are still in flux. Strong evidence suggests that Rainier Valley is being gentrified, threatening a crisis of displacement.

A report published by Puget Sound Sage in May this year—"Transit Oriented Development That's Healthy, Green & Just"<sup>3</sup>—found dramatic changes to Rainier Valley over the last decade. The strongest evidence of gentrification and displacement is in the

Chart:  
Race and Ethnicity  
Change in Rainier  
Valley.  
Courtesy of Puget  
Sound Sage.



contrasting racial demographics for growth in Rainier Valley versus the region as a whole:

- In King County, the population of color grew by 47 percent, while the population of whites shrank by 2 percent.
- In Rainier Valley, the population of color grew by 5 percent (42 percent below the county as a whole), while the white population increased by 17 percent (19 percent above the county as a whole).

The numbers illustrate that the growth in white population is outpacing that of people of color in Rainier Valley.

Rising property values in the light rail corridor provide stronger evidence of gentrification. Since 2005, land values surrounding Southeast Seattle's light rail stations have risen by over 50 percent.<sup>4</sup> Property values have increased even more at Rainier Valley stations that are hosts to new development. Assessed land value at the Othello Station, the site of a major luxury apartment building, appreciated by 513 percent between 2004 and 2011.<sup>5</sup>

In Rainier Valley, communities of color are disproportionately low-income, and gentrification will only force them to move out into the less expensive suburbs where they will experience decreased access to good jobs, schools, and other services, which will further push them into poverty.

### Conventional Focus of TOD Must be Replaced

A major force in determining how the light rail

will impact Rainier Valley is whether the development will be conventional or focus on economic and racial equity. Currently, TOD in the U.S. caters largely to higher income households as private developers and investors want to mitigate the associated costs.<sup>6</sup> Mainstream TOD literature and planning guides often limit social equity provisions to affordable housing. Community-based needs of stabilization and culturally relevant amenities rarely make the list of priorities.

Additionally, conventional TOD planning ignores access to quality jobs for low-income residents. Transportation and land-use planners often make an assumption that as long as a wide variety of jobs are located along a rail line, workers of all incomes will be attracted to station areas. However, recent evidence indicates that in transit areas, low-wage service sector jobs are growing faster than any other sectors, causing a deficit of quality jobs that can actually pay the bills of a working family.<sup>7</sup>

It does not have to be this way. When Rainier Valley communities were at the helm of the neighborhood planning process, they developed a vision for TOD that surpassed typical limitations on development. The plans included elements that could maintain and nourish the community, such as family-sized affordable units and expanded access to living wage jobs for area residents. The plan fit the community's needs because its focus was on benefiting them, as opposed to the developers.

Including a racial equity framework in TOD plan-

ning and policy can help break the cycle of historical disenfranchisement and institutional barriers to prosperity; but ensuring that TOD leads to real equity outcomes requires a sharper focus on what equity means and determined leadership to achieve those outcomes.

### Proactive Approach to Avoid Displacement

Rainier Valley TOD planning and policy must go beyond mere inclusion of community members in the process and take a more proactive approach to ensure racial equity because once displacement by gentrification occurs it cannot be undone.

Puget Sound Sage has put forth the following principles to inform planning and public policy around TOD. While it is not comprehensive, it provides a good starting point to deepen public and private sector commitment to incorporating racial equity into TOD initiatives.

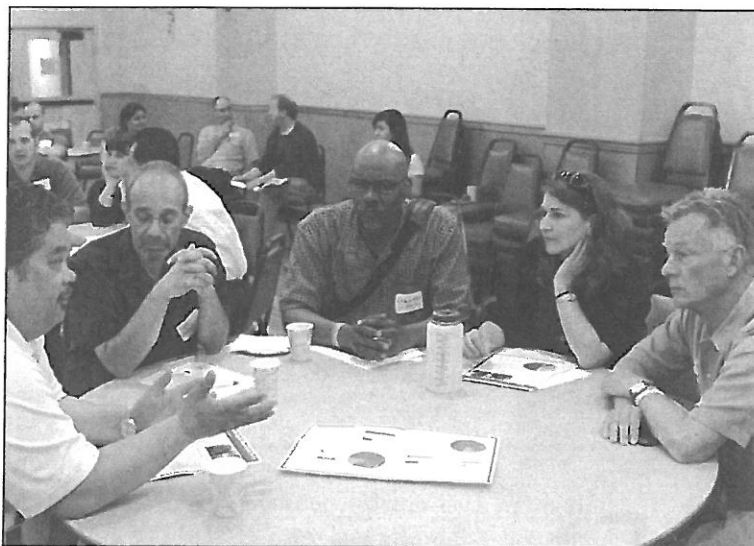
Existing area residents should benefit from TOD investment around the light rail and be able to thrive in place.

Creating quality jobs for neighborhood residents should be elevated as an equity strategy on par with creating low-income housing. This includes both construction jobs as TOD occurs and permanent jobs accessible throughout the light rail corridor.

Affordable housing that meets the needs of low-income families and communities of color should be incorporated into the TOD. Furthermore, it should include units large enough to house children and multigenerational families.

Community-serving institutions and businesses are needed to stabilize existing low-income communities of color as gentrification occurs. Affordable commercial space should be prioritized within the TOD and surrounding areas for community and cultural centers, service providers, and culturally relevant businesses.

Racial equity outcomes, not racial diversity goals, should drive the TOD planning. Only by creating racial equity will racial diversity be able to



thrive in Rainier Valley and to achieve this, people of color need to be instrumental in determining priorities and making decisions.

History has shown that when communities organize and speak out, they will have more influence on outcomes. As a result of the light rail development, Al has become a leader in Rainier Valley and Olympic Express has become a community hub, serving his religious community and the diverse residents of Rainier Valley. And Al's work with the local community development fund has already benefited other small business owners in the neighborhood. The success of the Olympic Express is linked to growing a community where all families thrive and that is only possible when you replace the traditional forces of development with the brighter promise of racial and economic equity. ■

### Endnotes

1. City of Seattle, "HUD Community Challenge Grant Application Abstract for the Neighborhood Equitable Transit-Oriented Development Initiative," (2011).
2. Ibid. The City refers here to the Station at Othello Park development by Othello Partners.
3. Download the full report at [pugetsoundsage.org/tod](http://pugetsoundsage.org/tod).
4. Ibid 1.
5. Puget Sound Region Council, "Assessed Land Value Appreciation—Othello Station, Housing," (April 2012).
6. Stephanie Pollack, Barry Bluestone, and Chase Billingham. "Maintaining Diversity in America's Transit-Rich Neighborhoods: Tools for Equitable Neighborhood Change," Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy, (October 2010).
7. Dena Belzer, Sujata Srivastava, and Mason Austin. "Transit and Regional Economic Development," Center for Transit Oriented Development, (May 2011). From 2002-08, the highest job growth (14 percent) of all sectors was in arts, recreation, food service, and accommodations—traditionally low-wage service sectors.

Photo:

Community conversation at Sage's report presentation of "Transit Oriented Development that's Healthy, Green and Just."

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