

Valley Improvement Project: “Working with the community to improve the community”

In 1975, the United Farm Workers march to a large winery in Modesto energized the successful push for laws to protect farmworkers’ rights. More than 30 years later, Modesto-based Valley Improvement Projects (VIP) is carrying on the area’s history of fighting for social and environmental justice. VIP has a vision of sustainable communities with clean air, water, and soil, powered by renewable energy.

Located in California’s San Joaquin Valley, Modesto has long grappled with some of the worst air quality in the nation, and faces ongoing struggles over water access and rights. Climate change makes a bad situation worse when warming temperatures, acting on air pollutants, create yet more smog. And California’s now several year drought has made less water available for any use, leaving fields fallow and many of the poorest communities without drinking water. In addition, current business and development trends in the Modesto region emphasize sprawl, commuter economies and truck transport, further increasing greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollution.

Recognizing the impact of these environmental harms on poor communities and communities of color, in 2012 Emiliano Mataka, Bianca Lopez, Thomas Helme and Adam Brazil formed Valley Improvement Projects to improve quality of life for marginalized residents of the Valley. VIP advocates for smart growth, alternative transportation, clean water, and better air quality — all issues that are linked to climate change, and that are essential to a better quality of life for Valley residents. In 2013 VIP went on to establish its Community Center for Social and Environmental Justice, offering services including computer and phone access; meeting space; a bicycle workshop; a library; clothes and food collection and distribution; and youth tutoring and art activities. The founders envision the center as a place for underrepresented people to learn, assemble and organize.

VIP works to address the root causes of pollution and climate change. Their *5 Point Platform* includes pushing for environmental justice and public health by emphasizing natural, sustainable agricultural and environmental practices. It emphasizes empowering and serving “the underrepresented and marginalized,” including youth and diverse community members, those without stable living conditions, and tenants and workers. Ensuring accountability from law enforcement, prison and immigration systems is also a key pillar of their work.



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True to its organizing focus, VIP collaborates with a wide range of environmental justice organizations and movements locally, statewide and at the national level addressing clean air, water, and soil as well as efficient, “green” community development and transportation. Key partners include the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, California Cleaner Freight Coalition, Central California Environmental Justice Network, Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice, Catholic Charities, California Environmental Justice Coalition, and the Peace and Life Center.

VIP’s motto is “Working with the community to improve the community,” and they know that their vision can only be achieved by building a critical mass of empowered people from the community, united in the fight for environmental and social justice and equality. This means nurturing a culture of involvement and awareness. VIP members attend public/governmental meetings, assist community members with resources and information, and hold educational workshops. VIP is actively involved in the anti-Keystone XL Pipeline movement, the anti-Monsanto movement, and the anti-fracking movement. In February of 2015 the power of organizing brought VIP members together with 8000 people from across the state, at an Oakland March for Climate Leadership demanding that the governor address fracking. Building on a decades-long history in Modesto of organizing and activism, VIP is working for people-powered change to improve the environment for health in the Valley.

For more information:

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