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President Barack Obama  
The White House  
Washington, D.C.

Re: Economic Stimulus, Public Works, and Equal Justice: Healthy Parks, Schools, and Communities for All

Dear President Obama:

Economic stimulus and public works projects must get the nation to work building healthy, livable communities for all. Concrete and steel, and bailouts for banks, insurance companies, and automakers, are not enough. Infrastructure projects must include parks, schools, affordable housing, mass transit, safe walkable streets, public art, youth job programs, and green jobs. People of color and low income communities must receive their fair share of public investments to alleviate unfair disparities. Solutions to many urban problems – obesity, no place to play, little hope for disadvantaged youth – must be tied to vision for a new America.

Applying public health criteria to infrastructure investments could improve health and quality of life across the nation. More than 125 million children are overweight or obese, more than triple since the 1980s, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Children will have a lower life expectancy than their parents if obesity is not reversed.

New Deal projects offer lessons for parks, schools, jobs for youth, public art, and equal justice. New Deal projects included 8,000 parks and 40,000 schools. The Civilian Conservation Corps expanded open space. Part-time jobs kept high school and college students in school and out of regular markets. The difference New Deal programs made in people's lives is incalculable.

The New Deal created work for artists, musicians, actors, and writers. Painters taught in schools, and painted murals depicting ordinary life. 15,000 musicians gave 225,000 performances in symphony orchestras, jazz groups, and free concerts in parks. Classics and contemporary works staged for 30 million viewers included productions with mixed and black casts. Writers wrote popular guides to each state, major cities, and interstate routes.

The New Deal was not a fair deal for all. Ira Katznelson's book *When Affirmative Action Was White* documents how New Deal policies excluded blacks, and increased income and wealth disparities. A continuing legacy is that the average black family holds just 10% of the assets of the average white family. The Federal Housing Authority sanctioned racially restrictive housing covenants, for example.

The nation must improve equal justice today. Hispanic, black, Asian and other nonwhite residents make up half of the nation's largest cities. Congress must strengthen Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination by recipients of federal funds, the President's Order on Environmental Justice, and the right to sue to fight job discrimination.

States cannot slash spending during the worst economic crisis since the Depression, at the expense of the most vulnerable and the nation's economic future. It makes no sense to cut state spending, and the voters have said so.

Voters in November taxed themselves and approved billions for parks and open space. Across the nation, voters

Healthy, Livable Communities For All

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approved 62 of 87 open space referendums. Congress should fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund for buying open space. In California, communities of color and low income communities have made the difference in passing resource bonds. California legislation targets urban park funds to park- and economically-poor communities. The Los Angeles River (drowned in concrete during the Depression) offers opportunities for hundreds of parks and schools, physical activity, affordable housing, and local green jobs.

Voters have approved billions more for school construction and modernization. Los Angeles alone has over \$27 billion, including \$7.2 billion approved last fall. Schools should be built with playing fields to provide places for physical activity to enforce physical education laws, and should be open after school and on weekends.

Parks and schools can provide physical activity to reduce obesity, improve academics, bring people together, and provide positive alternatives to gangs, crime, and violence. Joint use of schools and parks should make optimal use of land and resources. Multibenefit green spaces can clean the air and water, provide flood control, promote climate justice, and convert toxic sites and brownfields to green fields. Affordable housing is needed in underserved areas to prevent displacement of the people for whom the parks and schools are built.

The nation must address the youth crisis as part of the economic crisis. Federal summer jobs programs that worked for 30 years should be revived, and programs should keep young people in school, physically active, healthy, and out of gangs.

Public art projects should reflect diversity, democracy, and freedom. In the City of Los Angeles, only 76 of 900 official cultural and historical monuments pertain to women, people of color, or Native Americans. Studies like *Five Views* by the California Department of Parks and Recreation offer guidelines on diversity and its manifestations on the land. Native American sacred sites must be preserved. Judy Baca and SPARC (Social and Public Art Resource Center) with public grants and at risk youth are restoring and extending the Great Wall of Los Angeles, the longest mural in the world, depicting the region from the standpoint of diverse people.

Transportation dollars should provide transit alternatives to highways. More than 80% of gas taxes go to highways and bridges, less than 20% to transit. Transit can provide choices for people who have none, fight global warming, and reduce oil dependency. Transit to trails provides access to parks, mountains, and beaches.

Clean renewable energy infrastructure should be built in urban communities. The energy grid should be localized (avoiding massive power plants) to be better for health and the environment, reduce fossil fuel infrastructure that sits disproportionately in communities of color, and create green jobs.

The values at stake in a comprehensive economic stimulus and public works program include providing places for fun and physical activity; promoting health and reducing obesity; youth development and improved academic performance; art, culture, and historic preservation; conservation values of clean air, water, and land, habitat protection, and climate justice; economic vitality for all; spiritual values in protecting people and the earth; and sustainable regional planning. Fundamental principles of equal justice and democratic participation cut across these other values. Systemic reform will bring hope and change.

Very truly yours,

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