



Image by Edward P. Wade

The trouble with her breathing began a few months after Estella Lopez moved to Barrio Logan. Lopez is certain she knows why: “At five or six in the morning, you start hearing heavy noise. Like machinery working together. Like heavy metal banging.” Lopez lives on Main Street in an affordable-housing complex. She is 37 but looks older. She speaks very little English and answers questions with the help of an interpreter.

“One of the things is, I can never open the windows in the apartment, because my children are constantly sick. The little one, if we don’t take care of her, she is going to develop asthma.” Lopez’s six-year-old daughter shows signs of being in the disease’s early stages. “The doctor gave us a breathing machine for her. That’s why the windows are shut, so she can breathe clean air.”

Lopez has a square jaw and fine black hair pulled tight on her head. She earns \$8.25 an hour as a line cook at a Burger King in Coronado. She smiles only once during our conversation — a shy, furtive grin, really — when she explains how it is that she and the man she lives with, the father of their two girls, do not share the same last name: “We are not married.”

Lopez and her 13-year-old daughter take pills as a part of barrio living. She roots through her handbag and produces a small bottle filled with tablets. “Loratadine,” it says on the label, a drug which (according to drugs.com) is commonly used to treat allergies.

“The 13-year-old is allergic to the dust in the air,” she says. “And I am allergic to things like smoke in the air. The smoke that comes from the trucks and the contamination they are creating.”



Image by Howie Rosen

Estella Lopez, with her mother and kids, says, “I can never open the windows in the apartment because my children are constantly sick.”

Lopez pays \$550 per month for a two-bedroom apartment in the barrio. She says they used to pay closer to \$1000 for a one-bedroom apartment up on Ocean View Boulevard in Southeast. Does she consider the nearly 50 percent cut in rent a decent trade for the reduced quality of life she describes?

“No. It’s definitely not a good trade-off. We are not a high-income family.” Together, she and her live-in boyfriend bring home less than \$20 per hour before taxes. “Our financial situation,” she says, “made us do what we had to do.”

Breathing the air, it turns out, is a problem for a lot of people in Barrio Logan. The neighborhood is bordered by Interstate 5, Commercial Street, National City, and the second largest naval base in the continental U.S. It is a neighborhood like no other in San Diego, in that it has been zoned for both industrial and residential use, which exist side-by-side.

Within the barrio are rail yards, an oil-tanker facility, the NASSCO shipbuilding yard, diesel-powered cargo ships at the Tenth Avenue Marine Terminal, and diesel-truck traffic. When one factors in 200,000 cars per day on the freeway and another 70,000 daily commuters on the Coronado bridge, it's no surprise to learn that the barrio is awash in greenhouse gases. Hundreds of millions of pounds of toxic air pollution settle each year on Barrio Logan.

The bad air seems hardest on the youth here. The numbers of children with asthma is triple that of the national average, according to data compiled by the State of California and the Environmental Health Coalition, a San Diego nonprofit dedicated to achieving environmental and social justice. The respiratory disorder affects shift workers and laborers, as well, a moveable population that outnumbers Barrio Logan residents by more than two to one.

"Asthma is the most common disease of participants that we address with the disease-management program," International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 569 political director Jen Badgley recently told a joint meeting of port commissioners and city-council members. "Our members don't just work in the city. We live in neighborhoods like Barrio Logan."

"My husband worked at NASSCO for 35 years," says Maria Maya. She works for the Environmental Health Coalition as a community organizer. "The people that retire from there? They don't live very long past their retirement. They are the first line of the impact of the pollution. We have worked with NASSCO about doing more eco-friendly ways of welding, for example, but everything we do is a struggle because of the workers. That job is their bread and butter. They don't care [about their health] until they get sick."

At present, there is a new Barrio Logan Community Plan Update on the table that could change the face, and potentially the health, of the neighborhood — or not. Two basic redevelopment footprints are up for grabs. One, known as "alternative one" is residential; the other, "alternative two," favors industry. The city council is expected to vote on these in July, after which their recommendation will go to the coastal commission for final ratification, a decision not expected for another two years at the earliest.

The deficits within Barrio Logan, and the needs of its somewhat transient population of predominately low-income Latinos, first appeared on the public radar back in 1968 as part of the City of San Diego Model Cities program. As a result, the neighborhood got a clinic and youth services and some green belt in the form of a small public park located directly under the Coronado bridge ramps. This would become Chicano Park.

In 1974, the San Diego City Council sanctioned a community planning association composed of landowners, renters, and members of industry. They set out to build an even better barrio. Three years later, the council accepted the 239-page Barrio Logan Harbor 101 Community Improvement study. It is a singular read. For example, the authors described the fallout from allowing industry to dwarf the cultural, historic, and residential aspects of Barrio Logan in less than glowing terms: "The visual conflicts resulting from this land use pattern are an affront to normally accepted aesthetic standards."

The report went on to catalog a landscape poisoned by ozone, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and hydrocarbons, a place that was (and still is) utterly devoid of native plants and wildlife due to heavy urbanization. Barrio Logan, in other words, is a dead zone.

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By [Dave Good](#), June 26, 2013

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