West Oakland deserves better than dirty coal
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Oakland has a decision to make. The proposed deal to ship coal by rail through the export terminal project is a filthy bargain. No one should be forced to choose between a job and good health; our communities need both to thrive.

West Oakland has been a dumping ground for polluters for generations. People who live in West Oakland are twice as likely to wind up in the emergency room with asthma than other Alameda County residents are.

A baby born in West Oakland today has a life expectancy at least 10 years less than one born just miles away in the affluent Oakland hills. There are few places in America where the intersection of class, race and environmental oppression are clearer.

If we want to address the damage done, then we need to deeply invest in neighborhoods like West Oakland — right now.

Instead, West Oaklanders are in a fight for survival. The risk is clear: Developer Phil Tagami will use public land and taxpayer dollars to build a shipping terminal that would export up to 10 million tons of coal a year through West Oakland.

Tagami’s project has struggled, however, to secure funding, and this week the Utah Legislature will consider spending more than $50 million of Utah taxpayers’ money to help him build the terminal. State Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, has introduced anticoal legislation in the California Legislature to block the effort.
The shipments would arrive on coal trains that stretch more than a mile and would spew tens of thousands of pounds of dangerous coal dust on every trip. That coal dust contains lead, mercury and arsenic. It causes asthma and heart disease and is particularly dangerous to children.

It is no coincidence that 91 percent of the people who live within 1 mile of the tracks are people of color. Although the pollution and health impacts of this proposal would affect everyone in Oakland, people of color would certainly suffer the most. And the suffering wouldn’t end after the coal left Oakland, either. Once exported, the coal would be burned in power plants overseas, sickening poor people in other nations.

The developer promised the community the export terminal project would bring jobs. To build further support, he promised the project would not add to the pollution by exporting coal. He has broken that promise.

This developer has given the community a dangerous ultimatum — accept the polluting coal trains and health risks, or the promised jobs will not appear. But this is not true. According to the city of Oakland’s economic impact report, the facility can create the same number of jobs (and possibly more) if it exported other goods such as grain or even wind turbines — as was originally promised.

What West Oakland needs — and deserves — is a green economy that is strong and inclusive enough to lift people out of poverty. Those are the kinds of jobs that will usher in a new era of prosperity for local residents.

Coal is a dying industry, and it shouldn’t be allowed to take the people of West Oakland down with it. Instead of tying its future to a doomed and dirty fuel source, Oakland should demand a shipping terminal that won’t be tied for decades to a failing industry. Demand jobs and opportunity that don’t come with asthma attacks and heart disease. Demand access to the clean-
energy economy that is sweeping America by powering Oakland with more than 50 percent clean energy by 2030. If San Diegans can make a commitment to transition their city to clean energy, there’s no reason Oaklanders can’t do so as well. I urge readers to ask their Oakland City Council representatives to use their legal authority to ban coal exports.

When asked to choose between economic opportunity and public health, we should settle for nothing less than healthy, prosperous communities.

*CNN political commentator and former presidential adviser Van Jones* is the president and founder of the “Green For All” campaign.