

San José STEPS Coalition



ADVANCING HEALTHY, SAFE, & WALKABLE NEIGHBORHOODS ACROSS THE CITY

Funded by The Health Trust in 2012, California Walks—the statewide walk advocacy organization—partnered with Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County to found the Sustainable Transportation Engagement for Pedestrian Safety (STEPS) Coalition to address the leading causes of traffic crashes in San José: unsafe crossings, speeding (especially in school zones and senior areas), red light running, stop sign non-compliance, and inadequate/unsafe crosswalks.

The Coalition works to build the advocacy capacity of residents, to better coordinate and strengthen various pedestrian safety efforts and to advance policy, built environment and program changes to systematically improve walkability in neighborhoods across the City.

The Coalition has attracted a diverse membership, including

organizations and groups such as AGENTS for Change, TransForm, Breathe California, Washington Camina Contigo, and the California Alliance for Retired Americans (CARA)—Santa Clara County Action Team (CAT).

In Fall 2012, the Coalition adopted its policy platform outlining key policy and infrastructure reforms and opportunities for the City. The STEPS Coalition has focused its initial efforts on securing commitment from the City to establish a multi-faceted Safe Routes to Senior & Community Center program, including signal timing adjustments for crossings, lowered speed limits, additional signage and markings, and increased targeted enforcement and education programs.

This case study captures the successes of the Coalition's first two years and charts the

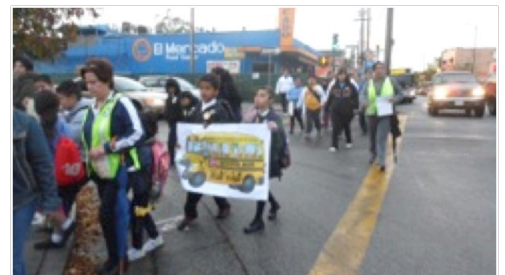
A Case Study in Community-Driven Advocacy for Walkable Neighborhoods

BY TONY DANG & WENDY ALFSEN,
CALIFORNIA WALKS

Coalition's future and ongoing work to make San José more walkable for people of all ages, abilities, and incomes.



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The STEPS Model

FAST FACTS

14.9%

San José Adult Population, Age 60+;
Source: 2012 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

42.2%

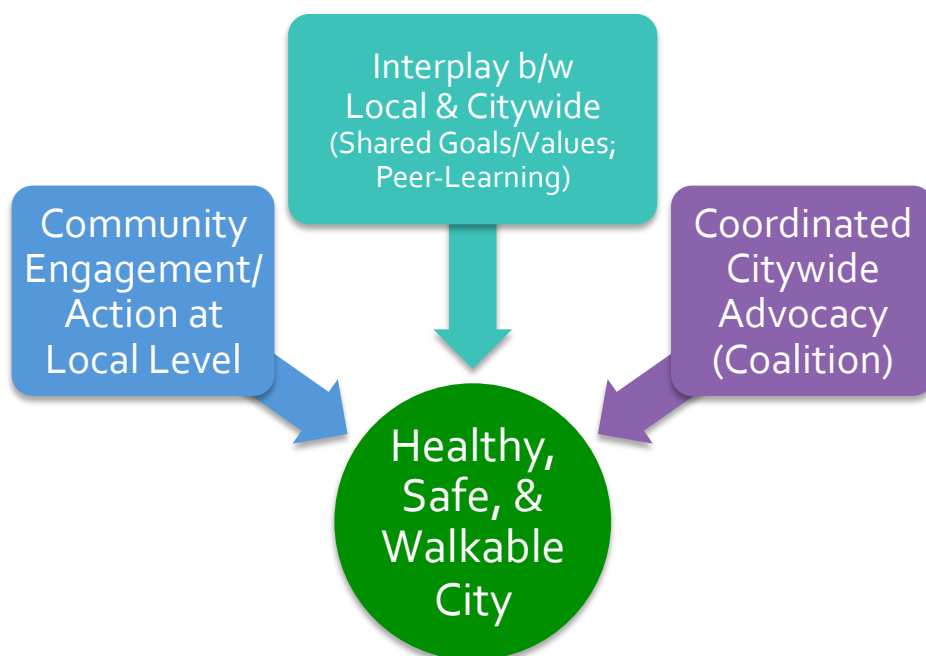
Percentage San José Pedestrian Fatalities Comprised of Older Adults (Age 60+);
Source: Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS), 2007-2011, Accessed via tims.berkeley.edu

33.6%

Percentage San José Pedestrian Fatalities Compared to Overall Traffic Fatalities;
Source: Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS), 2007-2011, Accessed via tims.berkeley.edu

3x Older Adults in 2040

Expected Growth in San José Older Adult Population (Age 65+) through 2040;
Source: "Appendix B. Projections of Jobs, Population and Households For the City of San Jose A Summary of Results and Methodology," Envision San Jose 2040 General Plan Update, Available at www.sanjoseca.gov/DocumentCenter/View/3326



The STEPS model of community engagement operates using a three-pronged approach: 1) advocacy capacity building at the neighborhood level; 2) building a community of practice for walk advocacy; and 3) coordinating and amplifying citywide advocacy via a Coalition.

Neighborhood Level

Because residents experience infrastructure improvements and education/enforcement activities more directly at the neighborhood level, it is critical to provide them with the tools and techniques to secure such improvements. The STEPS Coalition focused its efforts in following neighborhoods: Mayfair North/Alum Rock, Washington/Guadalupe, and Willow Glen. Residents were trained to conduct walkability assessments, and empowered to self-organize petition campaigns and community forums to demand infrastructure improvements.

Examples of improvements secured by residents include:

- Signal retiming at Jose Figueres to provide seniors more time to cross Alum Rock Avenue to access the Eastside Neighborhood Center;
- Relocation of a bus stop to align with the signalized, marked crossing at Jose Figueres and Alum Rock to encourage seniors to cross more safely;
- Signal retiming at Curtner Avenue and Almaden Road to provide more time for residents to cross busy roads to access shopping plaza;
- Installation of pedestrian safety island/curb extension at Curtner Avenue and Almaden Road with accompanying signage and striping; and
- Restriping of edge line to clarify width of lane along Almaden Road to encourage drivers to slow down.

Community of Practice

By convening residents from different neighborhoods all working on similar pedestrian safety issues, the STEPS model allows for peer-to-peer learning in an informal setting—rather than having outside “experts” come in to “teach” to the residents, the community of practice structure allows for residents in one part of town can learn from others in another part of town about the steps one group took in order to secure City staff buy-in and ultimately, on-the-ground improvements. For example, in May 2013, the United Seniors of Oakland & Alameda County shared with Eastside

Neighborhood Center residents their experiences with establishing, maintaining, and sustaining senior walking clubs for health and advocacy efforts. As a direct result of this peer-learning experience, Eastside Neighborhood Center seniors have since established 3 weekly senior walking clubs.

Citywide Coalition

The Coalition component of the model enables diverse populations to come together and collectively determine shared goals, values, and priorities. The Coalition’s shared goals include: equitable distribution of safety investments; coordination of community groups; providing a forum for information sharing; cultivation of working relationships with City/County/VTA staff; and collaboration to advance a shared policy platform for comprehensive, citywide approaches to pedestrian safety and walkability. The Coalition’s adopted 5-point policy platform guides its advocacy activities to:

- Establish a Formal Citywide Safe Routes to Community, School, & Senior Centers Program;
- Maintain Dedicated Funding in the City Budget for Pedestrian Safety Improvements;
- Demand Data-Driven & Public Processes to Prioritize Pedestrian & Bicycle Safety Improvements & Projects; and
- Expand the Reduced Speed School Zone Pilot Program.

The Coalition elected to pursue the Safe Routes to Community, School, and Senior Centers as its first priority. As a result of local wins to increase crossing times at the Eastside Neighborhood Center and the River Glen Mobile Home Community, the Coalition's push for a Safe Routes to Community, School, and Senior Centers prompted the City to evaluate

intersections at 13 centers, 43 senior housing complexes, and 256 schools—with approximately 200 intersections retimed as of August 2013. The Coalition is pursuing additional treatments, projects, and programs to complement this success and to move the City closer to a formal Safe Routes to Community, School, and Senior Centers program.



Senior Advocates at the Eastside Neighborhood Center

The Eastside Neighborhood Center (ENC) is located along Alum Rock Avenue—formerly a state highway—and serves a predominantly low-income, monolingual Spanish-speaking population in East San José. The neighborhood has slowly been transforming from former light-Industrial to a more residential neighborhood with a sharp rise in senior housing complexes, as well as a planned Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Line along the corridor.

Center staff continually fielded participants' concerns with poor sidewalk conditions, unsafe crossings, and dangerous motorist and pedestrian behaviors. Collaborating with California Walks, AGENTS for Change, and others, Center staff worked proactively to empower Center participants to conduct walk audits and self-organize to submit formal requests to the City in order to improve safety conditions.

The Center hosted a series of community forums in March 2012 for City agencies and the District Council Member to respond to resident concerns relating to pedestrian safety and the BRT project. As a result, one problematic intersection at Jose Figueres received several

Lessons Learned

• Language Barriers

Communicating traffic safety concepts in non-English languages presented an ongoing challenge. Though ENC staff provided translation during events, direct communication between organizers and community members in their native language is the most effective.

• Community Forums

After circulating petitions, setting a follow-up community forum inviting City, County, and VTA staff, as well as local elected officials, proved very effective at securing short-term improvements. The public forum provided the local City Council Member the opportunity to lend his critical support to expedite City agencies' responses to his constituents' concerns. Forums are also most effective when all responsible agencies participate to prevent one from "passing the buck" to another agency.

treatments, including increased crossing time and relocation of a bus stop to align with an existing marked and signalized crossing to enable Center participants arriving by bus to cross more safely.

As a result of these efforts, City staff became much more involved with Center participants—actively seeking community input on the addition of two traffic signals along Alum Rock as a part of the BRT project, as well as community support letters for the City’s \$1.5 million grant application for pedestrians and bicycle safety improvements along Jackson Avenue. City agency staff also solicited input on the creation of an older adult pedestrian safety education presentation, and the Eastside Neighborhood Center was the first site where the City piloted its educational presentation before a citywide rollout.

Center participants are still actively engaged in pedestrian safety efforts, and are currently pursuing a citywide campaign to lower speed limits around senior and community centers.



Lessons Learned (continued)

• Community Action Events

Engaging community members through direct actions, such as marches or crosswalk demonstrations, is very effective in building excitement and momentum for long-term advocacy efforts. Scheduling and theming events to local holidays, such as Día de Los Muertos (see photo above), engendered more support and participation from residents and resulted in greater media coverage.

• Cultivating Community Leaders

Having efforts directly led by community residents proved to be more sustainable in the long-run. Residents were more engaged and “owned” advocacy activities led by their peers. Providing small tokens of gratitude (e.g., grocery gift certificates) to both community leaders and volunteers helped in mobilizing and organizing petition signature gatherings and community-led walk audits.



Washington Camina Contigo—Parents Leading the Charge



The Washington/Guadalupe neighborhood is located just south of Downtown San José and not only is ringed by freeways but also by high-speed arterial streets that effectively function as surface freeways for commuters traveling to/from Downtown. The neighborhood is 89% Latino/Hispanic, and over 95% of Washington Elementary School students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged by the San José Unified School District, with roughly 85% qualified for the free or reduced price meal program.

The Santa Clara County 2012 Latino Health Assessment found that almost 20% of high traffic streets in the Washington/Guadalupe neighborhood lack any type of traffic control device, and more than a third of high traffic streets lack any infrastructure other than a crosswalk to help residents safely get across the roadway.

Not surprisingly, Washington Elementary School experiences the third highest rates for pedestrian and bicyclist injuries in the entire County. Despite these alarming statistics, nearly 2/3 of Washington Elementary students walk to school. On top of that, for Washington/Guadalupe neighborhood students and their families, real and perceived street violence are major deterrents to walking and playing outside. The Latino Health Assessment found that many parents refused to let their children outside due to presence of gang members, sex workers, homeless, hangers-on, drug users, and other participants in illegal activities. As one resident commented: "That's another problem with obesity, because if you want to keep your children safe, you have to keep them at home. You are not going to let them go out to the street or take them to the park because of what they are going to find there."

Lesson Learned

- **Leveraging the Media**

The end of 2013 saw a rash of pedestrian fatalities in San José, including the death of a 3-year old, in a marked crosswalk with the right-of-way—fatally struck mere blocks away from Washington Elementary School. Though distraught, community members quickly mobilized and organized a candlelight vigil to commemorate the death of not only the young boy, but all 21 people who died in 2013 exercising their right to walk in San José. The vigil captured the local media's attention—getting picked up by newspapers, radio, as well as TV—and refocused the conversation on the Washington neighborhood streets' dangerous conditions. The vigil even attracted the attendance/participation of State Senator Jim Beall, Council Member Sam Liccardo, and other elected officials.

Rather than letting these conditions overcome their community, parents of Washington elementary school students self-organized and worked with the school to launch a volunteer/community-led group: Washington Camina Contigo. Donning decorated safety vests, these parent walk not only their own children to school but also any neighborhood kids who would like to join them. By being visible and recognizable in the streets, these parents are trusted figures in the community.

Cal Walks, in collaboration with the Washington United Youth Center, worked to get the parents' program—commonly known as a walking school bus—formally recognized by the City's Safe Routes to School program (Walk 'N Roll). Cal Walks worked to educate and empower parents to identify the primary school walking routes and to conduct walk audits. The parents' findings and assessments were submitted to the City and a follow-up walk audit was conducted with City engineers.

Washington parents are continuing their collaboration with the City's Walk N' Roll program to schedule infrastructure improvements in the neighborhood based on the walk audit findings, as well as with City Department of Transportation to pursue a long-term project of converting a dangerous one-way couplet back into two-way streets to slow down traffic.



For More Information

Tony Dang, Deputy Director
California Walks
1904 Franklin St., Ste. 709
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 292-4435
www.californiawalks.org

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