

Community Engagement

The Core of Equitable Safe Routes to Parks Efforts



Safe Routes to Parks Relies on Real, Meaningful Community Engagement

Community engagement runs throughout each stage of the Safe Routes to Parks framework.

The first step toward improving safe, convenient park access is to understand the challenges identified by neighbors and residents to accessing local parks. Sometimes a solution is straightforward, but often it's more nuanced, and without involving local residents in your efforts, it's possible that you would work to craft solutions that don't solve the actual problems people face in accessing a park. Community engagement for Safe Routes to Parks requires more than one-time events to gather input; it requires developing meaningful relationships and involving neighbors in decision-making. Meaningful community engagement can contribute to support, ownership, and stewardship of a project, which can determine its long-term impact and success.

Everyone deserves safe and easy access to parks, but not all people and neighborhoods have that opportunity. Safe Routes to Parks is especially important in communities lacking infrastructure, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, and speed humps, to support safe walking and bicycling; where violence and crime are prevalent; and where there are high rates of weight-related diseases or conditions. Improving safe park access requires thoughtful assessment and inclusion of strategies aimed at overcoming these injustices in each stage of a community's [Safe Routes to Parks](#) efforts. This provides an opportunity to achieve optimal health for every person regardless of the color of their skin, their level of education or the job they have, their gender or sexual identity, whether or not they have a disability, or the neighborhood they live in.¹ This fact sheet offers ideas and examples of strategies to advance equity that can be included in the **Engagement** stage of Safe Routes to Parks efforts.

Engaging Communities in Safe Routes to Parks

Community engagement undergirds and runs throughout each stage of the Safe Routes to Parks framework. The goal of meaningful community engagement is to ensure the community's priorities are reflected in the work and that improvements made as a result of Safe Routes to Parks positively impact residents in both practice and perspective. In addition to physical improvements that make it easier and safer to get to a local park, the process should leave residents feeling positively about their ability to affect change in their community and that their desired outcomes come to fruition. Community engagement should not only happen at the beginning of your Safe Routes to Parks efforts, it should happen throughout all of it! Here are some tips for ongoing community engagement:

- ❖ **Authentic relationships with community residents, including youth, and organizations that live and work within the neighborhood(s) of focus are critical to equitable Safe Routes to Parks efforts.**

Take Action: Form relationships with community members and existing community based organizations. Remember that relationships are a two-way street. Show up to support efforts and events organized by community-based organizations, rather than solely expecting residents and organizations to show up for you. Real relationships should outlast one specific project.

Safe Routes to Parks aims to improve accessibility for people walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation, creating routes that are safe from traffic and personal danger for people of all ages and abilities, and ensuring that well-maintained and well-programmed parks are conveniently located within a 10-minute walk (approximately one half mile) from where people live.² Safe Routes to Parks provides advocates with the tools to champion safe and equitable access during consideration of park siting, community engagement, allocation of funds, planning, and implementation of traffic and public safety initiatives, as well as park improvements. Over the long term, with increased safety and accessibility, Safe Routes to Parks seeks to increase park usage and improve health and wellbeing for people of all ages, races, abilities, and income levels. To learn more, visit [Safe Routes to Parks](#).

- ❖ **It can be beneficial to approach this work with a coalition model so that it reflects the voices and priorities of many within the community, rather than one individual champion or organization.**

Take Action: Develop a coalition or engage with an existing coalition of community partners. The intended beneficiaries of your work should feature prominently in the coalition. Assess your list of coalition members to identify any potential gaps in representation. Include members from the following broad categories:

- Community residents/members: neighborhood residents and individuals who live near your focus park(s). This may include individuals who are already involved in different civic engagement functions or introduced to you by partners. These are the intended beneficiaries of Safe Routes to Parks efforts.
- Partner organizations: Other non-profit and community groups working on park access and aligned efforts
- Public sector players: These are staff affiliated directly with the city, county, or school system you're working in or with.
- Thought partners: There may be individuals or organizations that aren't working on aligned efforts or don't live in the community, but may have perspective or skills that can be helpful to include.

- ❖ **Safe Routes to Parks efforts benefit from including voices, opinions, and perspectives from the beginning.** That way, community residents and stakeholders can buy in from the beginning, and you can prevent feelings of animosity that can occur when people or communities are left out of planning processes.

Take Action: When planning events, work with partners to ensure a diverse and wide audience is invited and in attendance. Consider who are credible messengers in the community that can conduct initial outreach and extend invitations. Ask partners to invite their members, stakeholders, and contacts to meetings and events. Work with existing organizations like faith groups, neighborhood associations, Parent Teacher Associations, and Friends of Park groups to encourage their membership to take part in Safe Routes to Parks efforts. Individuals may be more willing to participate in your efforts when asked by an organization they already have a connection to.

- ❖ **People like to share their opinions, and they want to be heard, especially about projects that affect their community.** Leaving people out of this process could result in missing key insights or worse, potentially causing community opposition due to feeling left out of the process. Some unintended consequences can be avoided by creating an open and inclusive planning process.

Take Action: Community meetings and events should be highly publicized and should seek to engage a wide range of community residents. Incorporate various methods of communication, including newspaper, radio, message boards, and partner organizations, to widely publicize meetings related to Safe Routes to Parks efforts. Remember that information should flow both from the community to you and from you to the community. Design meetings to provide time for both sharing and receiving information.

- ❖ **There are numerous barriers that community residents may face to attending meetings and events, and events should be designed to avoid these hurdles to participation.**

Take Action: Host meetings at times and in locations that are convenient for community members, rather than for your team/city staff. Anticipate other potential reasons that may deter people from coming, and offer transportation, food, child care, and translation, if needed.

- ❖ **Robust, authentic community engagement can turn ordinary residents into project champions.**

Project champions help to bridge the project voice with the community voice. When there is resistance or unforeseen backlash, your champions are the best asset in communicating the positive aspects of the work and finding common ground to move the work forward.

Take Action: Provide real and meaningful opportunities for community residents to lead the work. Take a step back and allow them to be the voice of the project. Give the community champions the tools they need to carry this work forward.

References

1. Braveman, Kumanyika, Fielding, et al. (2011). "Health Disparities and Health Equity: The Issue of Justice" American Journal of Public Health. Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3222512/>.
2. "Safe Routes to Parks." National Recreation and Parks Association. 2016. Accessed June 22, 2018. <https://www.nrpa.org/Safe-Routes-To-Parks/>.
3. "Environmental Health Coalition: Mission." Environmental Health Coalition. Accessed October 2, 2018. <https://www.environmentalhealth.org/index.php/en/who-we-are/mission>.

Community Engagement in Action

The mission of the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) is to achieve environmental and social justice by empowering communities in National City, California, to work together to create change.³ EHC relies on vigorous community engagement to improve safe, secure park access for people of all ages and abilities in their predominantly Latino community. In 1996, EHC began delivering their Salud Ambiental Lideres Tomando Accion – Environmental Health, Leaders Taking Action (SALTA) Community Leadership Training Program.⁴ This web-based curriculum trains local leaders in community organizing, communication, policy advocacy, community health, and other capacity-building topics.⁵ Since then, over 2,500 residents have gone through this training, equipping them with the tools to be social change leaders in their community.⁶

Residents who participated in SALTA are working with EHC to improve Safe Routes to Parks by leading assessments of three parks (Pepper, Kimball, and Paradise Creek Educational Park) using an environmental audit tool called the Pedestrian Environmental Quality Index. They are working with city and Port of San Diego planners to analyze the data and develop maps that show connectivity issues from these parks to the Bayshore Bikeway, a San Diego bike route. Other members of the coalition working on Safe Routes to Parks include City and Port of San Diego planners, San Diego County Health & Human Services, and community-based organizations. To support full participation of community residents, meetings take place in a convenient location for community members and offer simultaneous language translation. Through this process, residents are able to voice their needs and co-develop the plans to improve safe and equitable access to parks in National City, which includes working with city transportation planners to remove contaminated soil and further develop the Paradise Creek Educational Park. EHC is a 2018 grantee of the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities Program.

4. "Environmental Health Coalition: SALTA." Environmental Health Coalition. Accessed October 2, 2018. <https://www.environmentalhealth.org/index.php/en/what-we-do/leadership-development/salta>.

5. "Environmental Health Coalition: SALTA." Environmental Health Coalition. Accessed October 2, 2018. <https://www.environmentalhealth.org/index.php/en/what-we-do/leadership-development/salta>.

6. "Environmental Health Coalition: SALTA." Environmental Health Coalition. Accessed October 2, 2018. <https://www.environmentalhealth.org/index.php/en/what-we-do/leadership-development/salta>.