



LEFT Workers from Northern California Construction Training rebuild the trail and add amenities. RIGHT Westlake Village children enjoy the new playground.

West Sacramento's Path to a Safer, Healthier Community

by Jude Hudson

About five years ago, parents and families living in a low-income neighborhood in the City of West Sacramento were frustrated, fearful and angry. Walking their children to the Westfield Village Elementary School had become an increasingly dangerous experience along a rough trail where crime occurred daily, and vagrants harassed pedestrians and solicited mothers. In addition, neighborhood children lacked a safe place to play. A group of Latino parents approached staff at the Yolo County Children's Alliance, a community-based nonprofit organization, and asked for help in finding a solution.

Katie Villegas, executive director of the alliance, listened to the parents' concerns and discussed possible options with them. The elementary school had a playground, but it was fenced and unavailable outside school hours. A disused sports field on the school grounds had been fenced. The parents asked whether that parcel of school property might be put to better use as a park. They wanted a secure walking path to school and a safe place for children to play with a tot lot, playground, grass and shade.

"Part of the challenge was that the city and the school district had not always worked well together," says Villegas. "There was resistance to change on all sides. And this proposed park was not on the city's Parks Master Plan. The residents essentially had no voice and little, if any, involvement in local government."

The Yolo County Children's Alliance facilitated meetings with the parents, the school superintendent and then-City Council Member (and now County Supervisor) Oscar Villegas, who is married to Katie Villegas. He says, "As an elected official, I tried to set a realistic tone about expectations. My role on the city council was to act as liaison to this community group. Managing expectations was a key part of that. People get discouraged when they

hear it could take six months, a year or more to get a project off the ground."

Oscar Villegas worked to create a rapport with members of the community, who were initially angry and distrustful. Face-to-face meetings helped establish trust and create the basis for a more friendly relationship. "It took a big leap of faith for these parents to become partners in this effort," says Villegas. "Infusing them with the confidence to express their vision was critically important. For the non-English-speaking women in the community group, going before the city council to speak was intimidating. We told them that showing enthusiasm and support would help produce results. We asked them to trust us and assured them that they would not be forgotten."

The group decided who would be the lead speakers, and about a dozen women and their children took their request to the city council. The parents explained what the desired improvements would mean for them, their children and their neighborhood. Oscar Villegas recalls, "We provided interpretive services, and they spoke at the council meeting with great enthusiasm, saying, 'We want to be part of the solution. We are excited about the prospects, and we understand that it will take awhile.' They made a great impression on the council." The city agreed to launch a collaborative effort with the school district and the community to build a park and playground.

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Nonprofit Pursues Funding Opportunities

In the meantime, the Yolo County Children's Alliance had been busy exploring ways to pay for the improvements needed for the trail leading to the school and the costs of building a playground and park. Kaiser Permanente was providing funding for the Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Cities Campaign, established in 2008 in California as a result of a partnership between the League of California Cities and the California Center for Public

Health Advocacy. The program supports cities in their efforts to improve the physical environment and give residents more opportunities to be physically active and eat healthful foods.

Executive Director Katie Villegas approached Kaiser Permanente. She invited their representatives to make a site visit and see the problems, and they agreed. "We walked them through this blighted area, which was littered with hypodermic needles, drug paraphernalia and other horrific things," she says. "A fire was

smoldering next to a homeless encampment on the trail. We explained that this was the only route many children had to get to school." Kaiser Permanente provided Yolo County Children's Alliance a grant of \$150,000 for park improvements.

In cooperation with the school district, the alliance opened the disused playing field at Westfield Village Elementary School as the first step in building a park. The alliance used the Kaiser Permanente grant funds to move the fence, build a path around the park and install a playground, using volunteer labor from residents.

"The school district is all for collaborative efforts that benefit the entire community," says Superintendent Linda Luna of the Washington Unified School District, where Westfield Village Elementary School is located. "Student safety is our number one priority. This project made it possible for families to walk to school safely and created a safe environment for recreation as well."

A 75-foot-wide underground sewer utility right of way that runs through the city was located adjacent to the rough trail and further complicated the process. Working with the city, the alliance reached an agreement with the sewer utility agency that allowed the alliance to remove the fence topped with razor wire that surrounded the ground over the sewer line and pave the path. According to Katie Villegas, this process was one of the project's most challenging aspects. "People were concerned about tearing down fences, but we needed to open up the space to make it safer," she says. "A lot of brush and weeds had to be cleared from the trail. The community wanted to move the fence to widen the trail, install picnic tables and benches and make it clean, inviting and safe."

Katie Villegas also pursued grant funding from the Wells Fargo UrbanLIFT program and secured \$80,000. The alliance used the funds to move fences, rebuild and pave the trail, install picnic tables and benches and plant an urban forest of 70 fruit and nut trees for the community. Northern California Construction Training (NCCT), a community-based nonprofit organization that provides pre-apprenticeship programs, did the work in phases, and its students got hands-on experience.

The new, improved path, called the Sycamore Trail, opened March 31, 2015.

The Yolo County Children's Alliance cobbled together funding in a creative, piecemeal fashion from a variety of public and private sources. The initial grants and work completed made it possible to

secure additional funding to build the park and playground. Construction on the park and playground began in 2011 and concluded in early 2014. The next steps for the park include securing the funds needed to build restrooms, and the city plans to install lighting.

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Two sets of railroad tracks and a freeway bisect the City of West Sacramento, making it impossible to cross the city on foot or bicycle. The trail and a freeway overpass will connect the community and allow for pedestrian and bike travel. See page 17 for more details. Source: City of West Sacramento Public Works Dept.

Partners Check Their Egos at the Door

"This project was nontraditional. Without a range of collaborative partners, it would not have come together," says Oscar Villegas. "Even the residents who were initially interested in overnight results realized they would be better served by a longer-term project with more amenities."

The arduous and complex process took several years. The Yolo County Children's Alliance played the role of a neutral third-party facilitator. The project initially encountered difficulties created by agencies holding tight to bureaucratic protocols and the desire to take credit for the effort.

"Although memoranda of understanding had been in place for years, we had to build new cooperative relationships between the school district, the city, residents and the other parties involved," says Katie Villegas. The alliance achieved this by emphasizing the spirit of collaboration and the goal of doing what was best for the community and its children. "You have to get the right people involved and give credit to all involved," she adds. "There can be no grandstanding, otherwise funders are not interested in the project."

Oscar Villegas adds, "People were pretty good about checking their egos at the door."

Funders' interest in the project served as a catalyst to turn around the resistance to change that existed before the project gained momentum.

"The work that the Yolo County Children's Alliance did with the Kaiser Permanente grant focused attention on the neighborhood," says West Sacramento Mayor Christopher Cabaldon. "The Sycamore Trail project improved the environment for health and safety. In part, this is because the neighborhood residents were so involved. There is a sense of ownership that would not have happened if the city had just gotten a grant and done the project on its own. Folks use the trail and protect it against vandalism and graffiti — they treasure it."

Building a Safer and Healthier Community

"In the days that followed the Sycamore Trail ribbon-cutting ceremony, lots of people were out using the trail and the park," says Oscar Villegas. "This type of community effort instills deep-seated pride. It took a lot of energy and effort to accomplish. Some of the children were

very small when their families started talking about the need for this project, and now they are old enough to go to the park by themselves. The residents are more likely to protect the park and notify the authorities of any problems that may arise because they have a stake in it."

West Sacramento Deputy Police Chief Deanna Stevens acknowledges the project's positive impact. She says, "The increased attention to the trail and its reconstruction has suppressed the appeal it once had for criminal activity and has allowed it to become a path that families in our community can use on a daily basis."

"It's very powerful when multiple entities and the community work together," says Superintendent Luna. "The school district was grateful to have the opportunity to help make a difference for the neighborhood."

"This is a very high-needs, low-income area," Katie Villegas adds. "You have to think outside the box to make things happen. People will get involved and engaged if it's an urgent neighborhood issue. If I had to do it again, I would try to fast-track more of the process if possible. But failure was not an option on this project." ■

SYCAMORE TRAIL PROJECT GENERATES BROADER EFFORT

The blight and crime along the trail in the Westfield Village neighborhood were symptoms of a larger problem. The city's physical features make traveling short distances from north to south by foot or bicycle extremely difficult, because railroad tracks and a freeway running from east to west create barriers to through traffic (see map on page 15). The major thoroughfares are not pedestrian friendly. The freeway bisects attendance districts for local schools and separates neighborhoods from job centers.

Using the sewer line right of way for the trail generated interest at the city level in extending the trail to connect the neighborhoods north and south of the freeway.

"The utility right of way gave the city the ability to punch through existing neighborhoods using an existing pathway. It was a tremendous opportunity for the city to work with utility partners to develop this,"

says Chris Dougherty, transportation program specialist for the City of West Sacramento. "Previously, the right of way was blighted and gated off. Now it's a great active transportation element through the central part of the city."

Phase 1 of the Sycamore Trail on the north extends from Rice Avenue, just below the Union Pacific railroad tracks, to West Capitol Avenue. "So far, it's a small component of what's being built over the next year," says Dougherty.

"It's hard to get from the Westfield Village neighborhood to other areas of the city except by car," says West Sacramento Mayor Christopher Cabaldon. "Phase 2 extends the trail farther south to include a bridge over the freeway to the schools on the south side of the freeway. Phase 3 takes it all the way to the port with a bike and pedestrian path to the high school and charter high school. The trail encourages

people to travel from one neighborhood to another and contributes to their longer-term successes, both economically and as a cohesive community."

The city will use state and federal funds to pay for the overpass and trail extension.

City of West Sacramento Planning Commissioner Andrew Sturmfels says, "The first phase of the trail, about half a mile long, was partially funded through the Sacramento Area Council of Governments. When the Sycamore Trail is completed, it will be about 1.5 miles long and provide a valuable connection between the north and south areas of the city. This project also creates a place for recreation and provides safe routes to school."

When it is completed in August 2016, the Sycamore Trail will connect students to schools and residents to jobs and activities.

"People were concerned about tearing down fences, but we needed to open up the space to make it safer." — Katie Villegas



RIGHT Maria Alonzo, one of the parents who approached the city council to ask for help in creating a safe, healthy space for children and families, drops her son off at Westfield Village Elementary School.





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