

Safe Routes to Schools Service-Learning Projects in San José Spark Longstanding Student Engagement in Community Planning

Project 2061
February 2021

Richard Kos, AICP

Safe Routes to Schools Research with Urban Planning Graduate Students at San José State University

The primary objectives of Safe Routes to Schools planning involve removing the physical and emotional barriers that currently prevent children from actively walking or biking to school. These barriers include lack of sidewalks or other infrastructure, unsafe walkways and crossings, and lack of educational and encouragement programs for children, parents, and the community that promote walking and bicycling. However, to be truly successful, these well-intentioned and necessary planning efforts must be built on block-by-block, systematic documentation of physical conditions around the schools, coupled with direct and sustained engagement with school leaders, parents, and children for whom the programs are designed to benefit. Teams of energetic and mission-driven university students, through structured service-learning projects, can be an instrumental component of Safe Routes to Schools planning.

This report highlights the work of graduate urban planning students at San José State University to conduct comprehensive assessments of street conditions surrounding five schools in San José. The students' careful research – coupled with the productive conversations they initiated with local parents, their children, and school principals – was instrumental in successful Safe Routes to Schools efforts in central San José.

Prospective students applying for admission to the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at San José State University write personal statements to accompany their admissions materials. Many of these statements are notable in that they reflect strong, even visceral, dissatisfaction with today's transportation landscape and yearn to improve it. For example, one applicant traced her mission as an urban planner directly to a terrible experience after moving to New York City: "Two months to the day after I moved, I was struck by a car. As a pedestrian. In a crosswalk, on my green light, by a privately owned vehicle..... I became a statistic, one of many pedestrians hit by a car. Little did I know that moment would become a catalyst for everything that has happened thereafter." Such career motivations are surprisingly common; quite a few of the students' statements thoughtfully articulate daily experiences in communities that offer no viable alternatives to the private automobile, while others chronicle transportation-related injuries to themselves or family members. Many personal statements demonstrate a clear-eyed understanding of transportation financing imbalances that consistently favor "cars over people" – a phrase that appears in many graduate program applications year after year.

To study and solve problems such as these, urban planners are trained to balance visionary thinking with pragmatic problem solving, working in partnership with multiple stakeholders to address challenges related to growth and change. Harnessing the time and energy of energetic and diverse

graduate students through service-learning projects forms a cornerstone of the mission of the Dept. of Urban and Regional Planning's work at San José State. The two projects described in this report illustrate the benefits of such projects for the students, their community partners, the perception of the university beyond its campus, and the City of San José broadly.

Employing the Collaborative Neighborhood Planning Model for Safe Routes to Schools Planning at Anne Darling Elementary School

All graduate students in SJSU's Masters of Urban Planning program complete a six-unit course in one of their final semesters: Capstone Studio in Community Planning. The primary objective is to get students "out of the classroom and into the neighborhoods" by completing an intensive service-learning project for a local San José community. In the fall 2010 and spring 2011 semesters, the location of the project was Anne Darling Elementary School (see figure 1), situated along an intensely trafficked arterial roadway that feeds into U.S. Highway 101. At the time of the study, 525 K-5 students attended the school, many of whom had to navigate decidedly unsafe and unpleasant conditions in their daily journey from home to school. Figures 2, 3 and 4 illustrate these conditions.

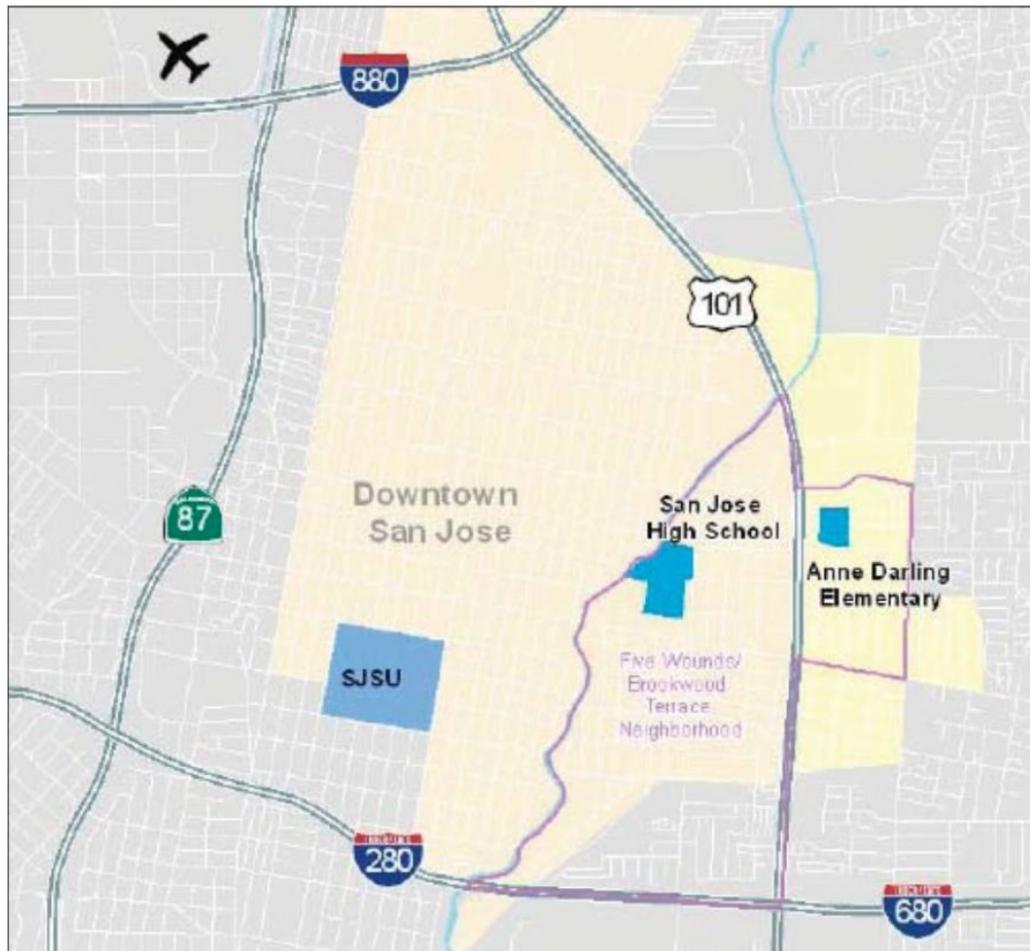


Figure 1. Location of Anne Darling Elementary School and notable Central San José features

Source: "Safe Routes to School" Community Assessment Report produced by SJSU urban planning graduate students, 2011



Figure 2. Example of unpleasant pedestrian conditions near Anne Darling Elementary School

Source: Richard Kos



Figure 3. Moe's Stop, a gas station directly across the street from Anne Darling Elementary School. The station's low prices attract a constant stream of drivers, creating hazardous pathways for cyclists and pedestrians.

Source: Richard Kos



Figure 4. Several wide, speed-encouraging streets connect Anne Darling Elementary School to the homes of students. These routes lack safe and dedicated pathways for cyclists and pedestrians.

Source: Richard Kos

This Safe Routes to Schools project at Anne Darling Elementary School was organized by CommUniverCity San José (CUC), a multi-sector partnership, as the three-part name implies, between local San José communities, San José State University, and the City of San José. Since its inception in 2005, CUC has focused its efforts on the underserved neighborhoods of central San José. These diverse communities are home to about 10 percent of the city’s residents; 64 percent of the population is Hispanic, and about 45 percent of residents are foreign-born. CommUniverCity’s programs impact low-and-moderate income residents living in neighborhoods near the university. In these areas, median household income (\$56,299) is 58 percent of the median income in the City of San José as a whole, and 40 percent of households earn less than \$50,000 per year. Nearly 85 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. A significant percentage of K-12 students in the schools that partner with CUC perform below grade level in English and Math.

CommUniverCity projects help advance San José State University’s mission “to enrich the lives of its students, to transmit knowledge along with the necessary skills for applying it in the service of our society, and to expand the base of knowledge through research and scholarship.”

To date, CommUniverCity has engaged 119,721 residents in community-building projects and 22,830 students have invested 432,352 hours. Together with faculty and staff volunteer time, this represents the equivalent of \$9.39 million of benefit to local communities.

Since 2005, CommUniverCity has focused most of its efforts in the Five Wounds Brookwood neighborhood – which includes Anne Darling Elementary – where it continues to log many successes today. Starting in 2012, CommUniverCity began to play a more prominent role in filling the urban planning void caused by the dissolution of California’s Redevelopment Agencies. These agencies, a casualty of the Great Recession of the late 2000s, once provided significant funding and staffing for San Jose’s Strong Neighborhoods Initiative that supported community improvement projects in Five Wounds. San José State’s Urban Planning faculty and students have also been instrumental in continuing the positive work started by the defunct Strong Neighborhoods Initiative.

To guide the Anne Darling Elementary School Safe Routes research, the graduate students adopted the Collaborative Neighborhood Planning Model to guide their data collection and community engagement efforts. The model includes three phases, described below and in the three subsequent sections of this report:

- **Community Assessment:** preparation of a comprehensive documentation of historical and current conditions in the study area.
- **Community Building:** developing trust-based relationships with community leaders to review assessment findings and set community-driven priorities for next steps in the planning process.
- **Implementation Bridges:** developing short- and long-term solutions for addressing community-driven priorities by identifying supportive city departments and people, possible public and private funding streams, and anticipated timelines to completion.

Community Assessment of Walking and Biking Conditions around Anne Darling Elementary School

The “ethos” of the Capstone in Community Planning course – emphasized on the first day of class – is Asset-Based Community Development. The ABCD approach shapes planning-based, service-learning projects since it places primary emphasis on what is already working well in local communities – its assets and internal capacities for change – as characterized by trusted individuals, organizations, and webs of mutual support. The ABCD model emphasizes a “bottom-up” approach to community planning that capitalizes on community uniqueness and assets rather than concentrating exclusively on how outside organizations should “fix” deficits and problems.

Unlike traditional planning approaches in which urban planners get to know neighborhoods primarily through “clinical” desk research, the ABCD model incorporates mixed methods, diverse sources of qualitative data, and – most vitally – friendly and welcoming, face-to-face, on-site engagement with community members. The model’s primary emphasis on leveraging community assets encourages local residents to recognize the power they already possess to mobilize and support one another to catalog self-identified neighborhood improvement priorities. From this position of empowerment, community leaders can then seek implementation assistance, as needed, from outside organizations.

The graduate student team committed to the principles of ABCD when conducting the community assessment of the neighborhoods around Anne Darling Elementary School, focusing first on listing neighborhood strengths, trusted institutions and people, and cherished places. Notable components of the assessment included:

- careful documentation of demographic data and physical conditions in the study area
- pinpointing key topical and geographic areas of concern based specifically on the ideas and viewpoints shared by parents, students, school administrators, and other community leaders
- preliminary identification of potential funding sources for community leaders to draw upon when implementing Safe Routes to School programs at Anne Darling Elementary School

Some of the interesting findings from the community assessment are illustrated in figures 5 through 8, showing maps prepared by the graduate students using Esri's ArcGIS Geographic Information Systems software:

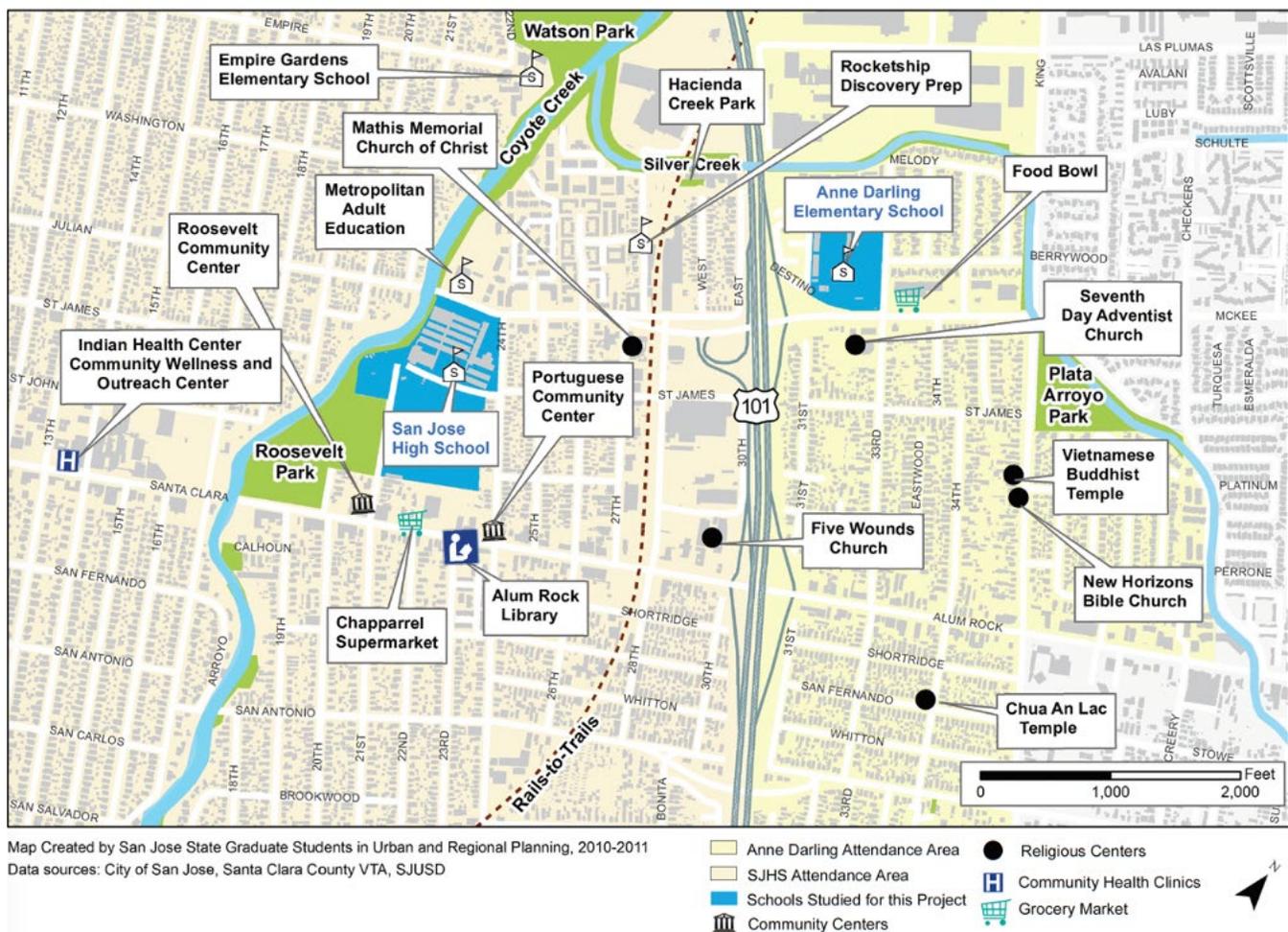


Figure 5. Community assets around Anne Darling Elementary School

Source: "Safe Routes to School" Community Assessment Report, SJSU graduate student team, Spring 2011

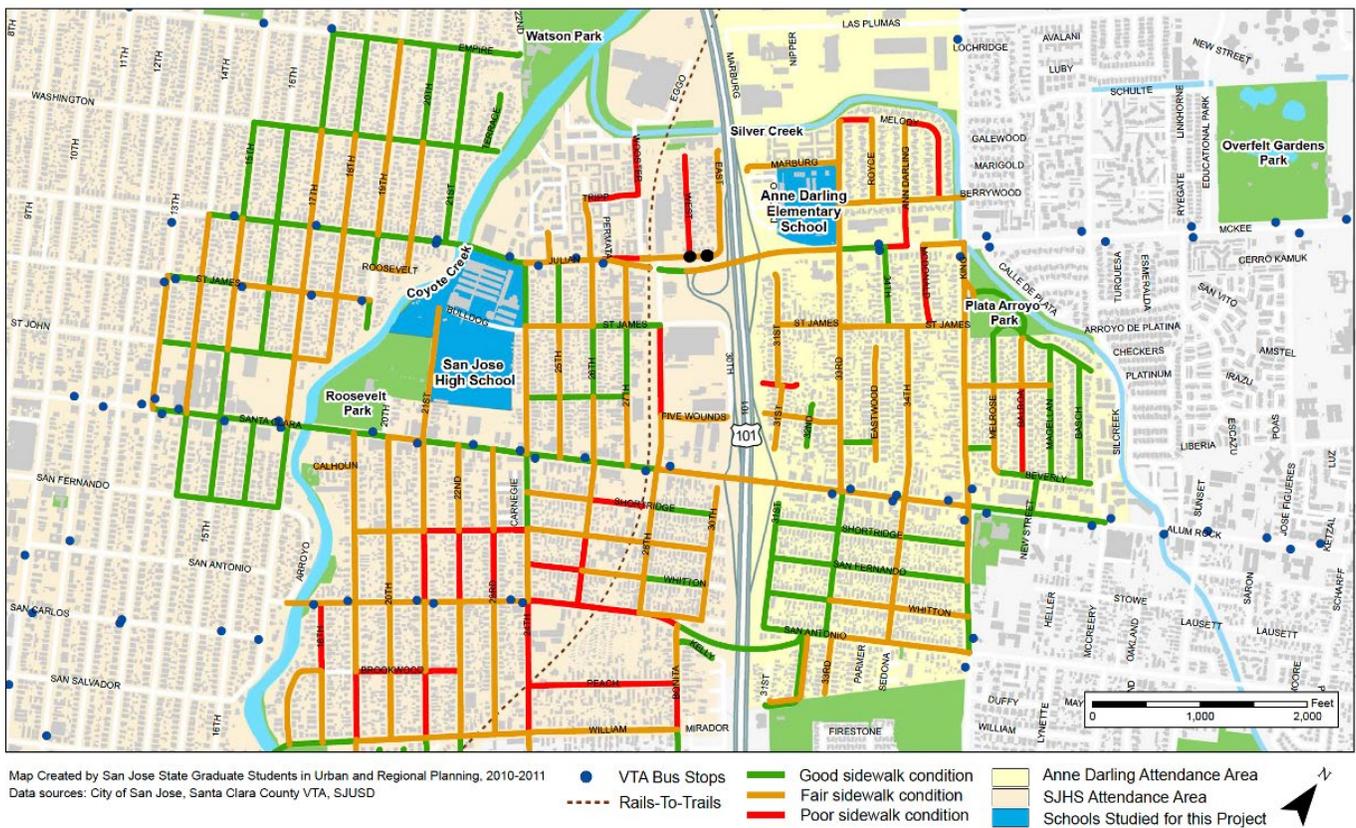


Figure 6. Condition of sidewalks in the project study area

Source: "Safe Routes to School" Community Assessment Report, SJSU graduate student team, Spring 2011

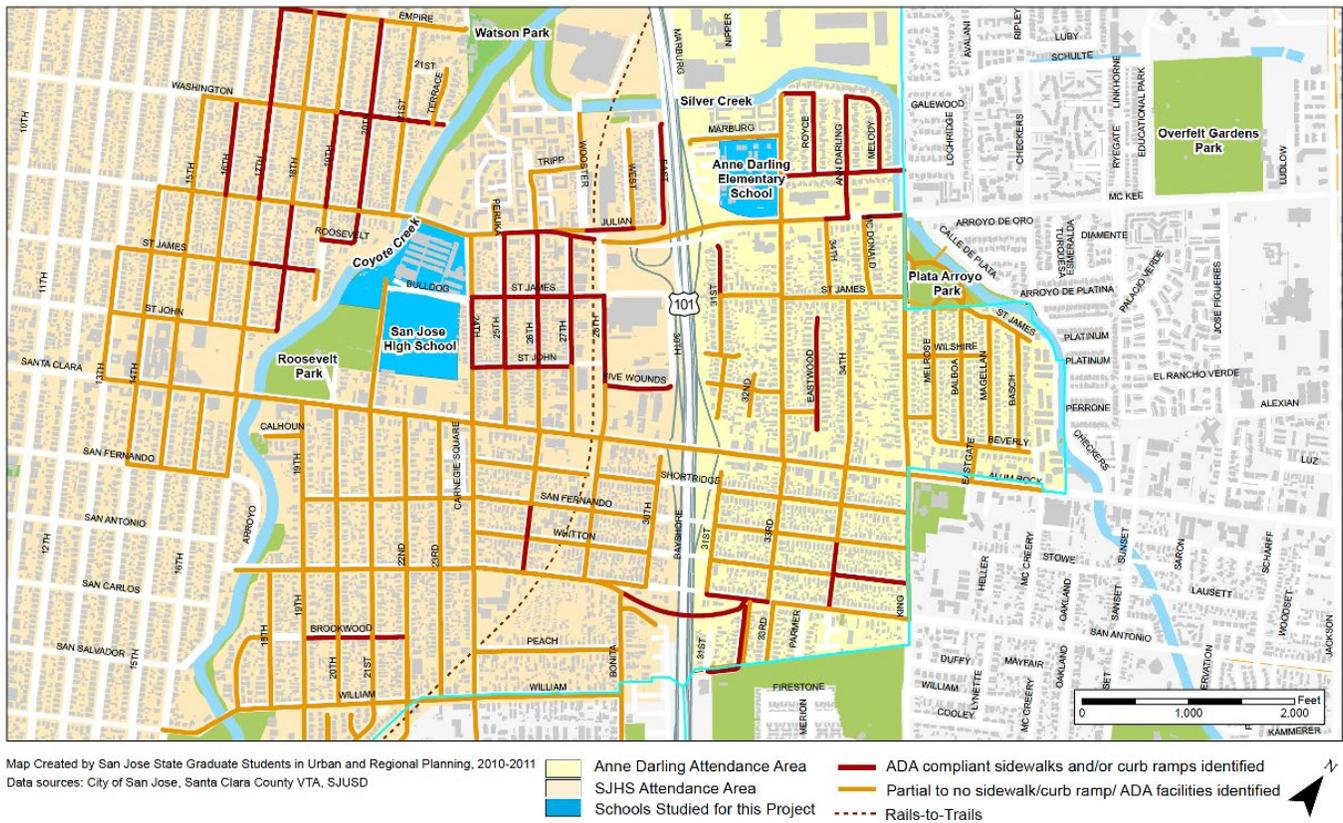


Figure 7. Systematic assessment of compliance with ADA standards for sidewalks and ramps in the study area

Source: “Safe Routes to School” Community Assessment Report, SJSU graduate student team, Spring 2011

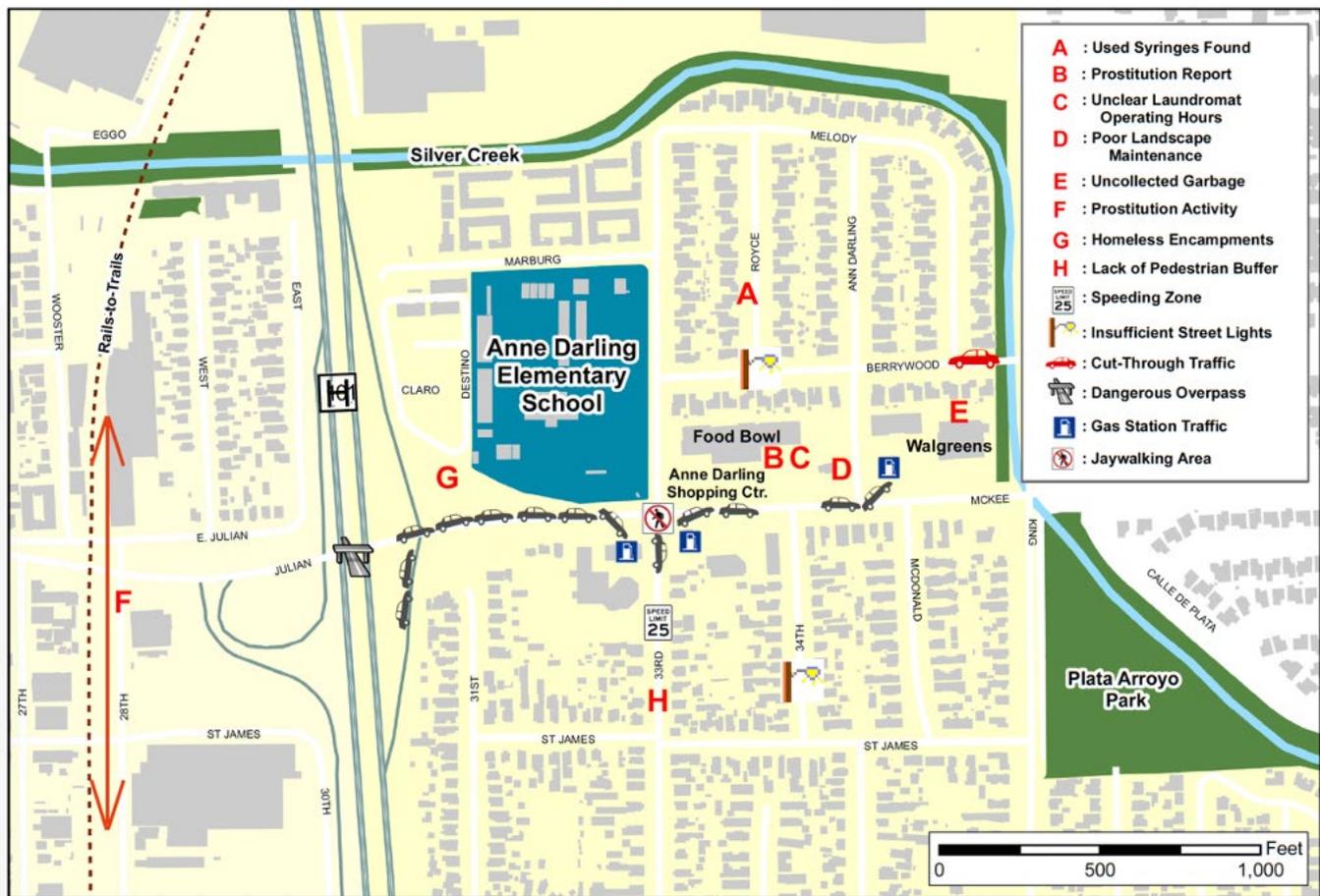


Figure 8. Community member-identified problems around Anne Darling Elementary School

Source: "Safe Routes to School" Community Assessment Report, SJSU graduate student team, Spring 2011

Community Building at Anne Darling Elementary School

With the assessment complete, the work turned to three highly successful community-building tasks: (1) the establishment of a Parents Task Force to guide the priority-setting process; (2) the use of surveys and informational interviews to identify the top mobility-related concerns of local residents; and (3) the organization of well-publicized events to highlight community-driven Safe Routes to School objectives and solutions. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate highlights of the Community Building phase of the Collaborative Neighborhood Planning approach.



Figure 9. SJSU graduate urban planning students collaborated for months with a Parents Task Force to document walking and biking conditions in the Anne Darling Elementary School vicinity.

Photo Source: CommUniverCity



Figure 10. Anne Darling Elementary students – with assistance from their parents – photographed and wrote movingly and candidly about walking conditions in the neighborhood from their unique perspectives.

Photo Source: Richard Kos

CommUniverCity staff took the lead in forming the task force of parents – often with their children in attendance at biweekly meetings – that convened at Anne Darling Elementary School to have candid discussions about their daily experiences navigating the streets of the neighborhood. Translation services, activities for the children, and refreshments were provided by CommUniverCity. Concurrently, the graduate urban planning students designed and administered a detailed survey to determine how the K-5 students travel between home and school. In so doing, the graduate students served as “ambassadors” for the Asset-Based Community Development approach by immediately positioning the residents as the experts in their community, with the students providing *expertise* in the form of structured research methods, systematic data collection, and proper interpretation and summarization of the survey data.

The discussions between school administrators, parents, children, and the graduate urban planning students ultimately led to two memorable events on May 4, 2011: three morning Walking School Bus routes and, later in the day, a Bike Rodeo sponsored by the Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition. The colorful Walking School Bus “vehicles,” designed by the children of Parents Task Force members, served as the focal points as about 125 parents and their children walked en

masse to the school, confidently crossing streets normally hostile to pedestrians, as drivers waited for the long procession to pass. The event was clearly invigorating for all who participated – there was a palpable sense, as the children waved happily to the temporarily inconvenienced drivers, that the local neighborhood streets had been reclaimed, even if for only a few minutes. This sense of empowerment was not lost on the parents of this historically marginalized and underserved community. One father, delightedly watching his fourth-grade daughter enjoying her safe walk to school, shared with instructor Rick Kos that “we don’t have anything like ‘planning’ in the country where I’m from”.

Later that same morning, the students in 3rd to 5th grade participated in a Bike Rodeo to learn techniques for safe riding, navigate obstacle courses safely, and to understand street signs. A unique aspect of the Rodeo – clearly a favorite for the children – was a “Slow Race”, where cyclists were encouraged to ride as *slowly* as possible in order to win, as a way to illustrate the benefits of slow, focused, and steady riding. Figures 11 through 14 capture the spirit of the day’s activities.



Come and Join Us!!



Walking School Bus to Anne Darling!!

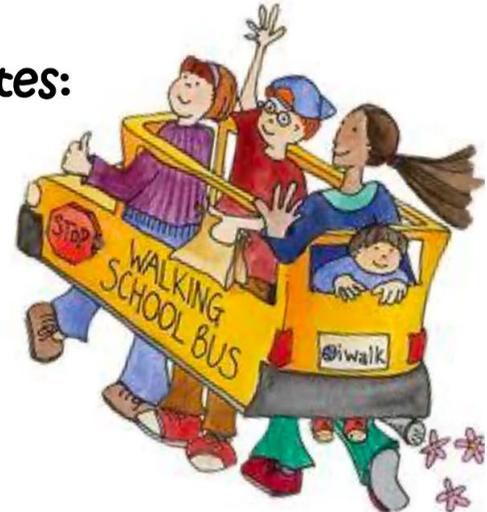
Parents! Remember that May 4th at 7am to 8am, your fellow parents and students will be walking to Anne Darling Elementary in a walking school bus!

There will be three routes:

- #1: Beverly and Basch
- #2: 30th and Whitton
- #3: 33rd and San Antonio

It will be lots of fun!

For more information, please contact Sabrina Dueñas:
Sabrina@communivercitysanjose.org



¡Acompañenos!



Walking School Bus de ida y de regreso a Anne Darling!!

¡Padres, recuerde que el 4 de Mayo a las 7am padres e hijos van a caminar juntos a Anne Darling!

Habrà tres rutas:

- #1: Beverly y Basch
- #2: 30th y Whitton
- #3: 33rd y San Antonio

¡Serà muy divertido!

For more information, please contact Sabrina Dueñas:
Sabrina@communivercitysanjose.org



Figure 11. Promotion of the three Walking School Bus routes

Source: CommUniverCity



Figure 12. The Walking School Bus event was an unqualified success and a joyful experience for local parents and children as they approached Anne Darling Elementary School, temporarily reclaiming streets normally hostile to pedestrians and bicyclists.



Figure 13. The Walking School Bus parents and children confidently navigate the heavily traveled streets in the vicinity of Anne Darling Elementary School.



Figure 14. Scenes from the Bike Rodeo at Anne Darling Elementary School

Photo source: Richard Kos

Immediately following the day’s events, the graduate student team administered a survey to the participating Anne Darling Elementary students to see if the activities changed their views of walking and biking to school. The results were compared to the pre-event survey findings, and a number of encouraging results were found. For example, the charts in figure 15 reflect data on helmet use. The pre-survey results (on the left) reflect responses to the question “how often do you wear your helmet while biking?” (scores range from 5 to 1, with 5 as “always” and 1 as “rarely or never”). Following the Bike Rodeo event, which consistently emphasized the importance of wearing helmets, students were asked “how likely will you use your helmet when you ride your bike?” The chart on the right reflects somewhat of a mirror image of the pre-survey results.

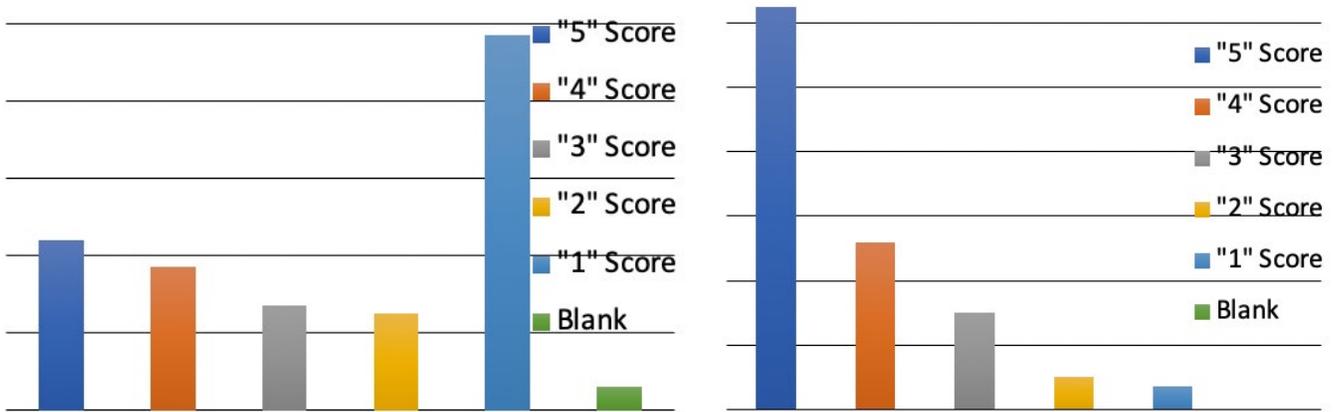


Figure 15. Pre- and post-safety event survey findings to questions pertaining to helmet usage.

Source: CommUniverCity

Other survey findings were equally as encouraging. The left chart in figure 16 shows the results of the question “how likely are you to ride your bike to school?” while the chart on the right shows the results of the same question, asked after the May 4 events. Again, “5” means “always” and “1” means “rarely or never.”

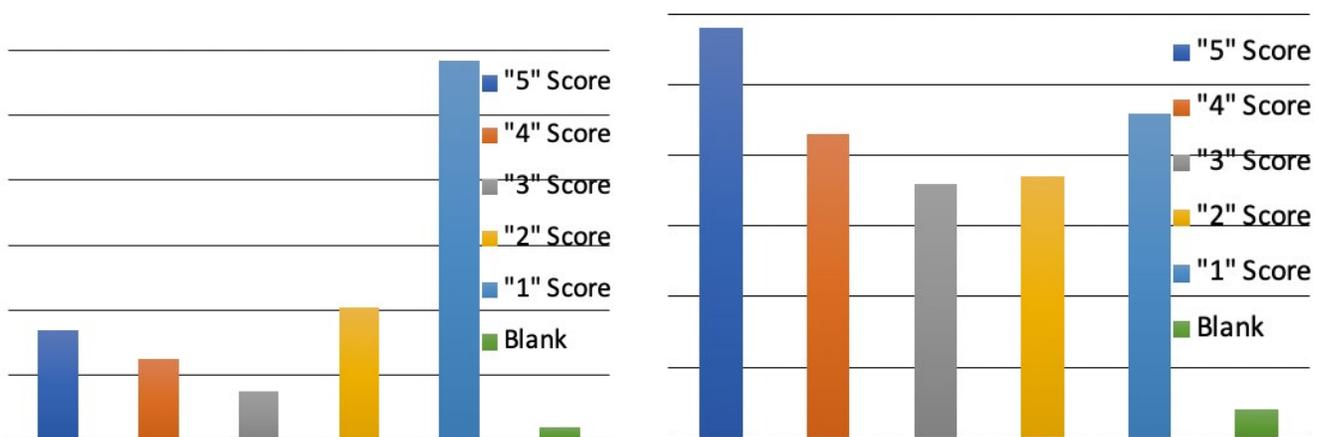


Figure 16. Pre- and post-safety event survey findings to “how likely are you to ride your bike to school?”

Source: CommUniverCity

Developing Implementation Bridges to Link Community-Driven Priorities with Supportive Programs and Funding Sources

After community assessment and community-building efforts are completed, the final phase of the Collaborative Neighborhood Planning model is the development of “implementation bridges”, charts that link community-identified priorities to recommended solutions. An example of such a chart, prepared by the graduate student team, is illustrated in figure 17; this one is focused on engineering-related interventions. Each of the charts centered on one of the “five E’s” of Safe Routes to Schools planning that were in place in 2011: education, enforcement, encouragement, engineering, and evaluation. One additional “E,” equity, was added in later years – and one “E” was replaced, as explained in the final section of this report. Figure 18 reflects the students’ efforts to illustrate possible flows of funding to Anne Darling Elementary School to support Safe Routes improvements.

Engineering Recommendations

Action #	Action Item	Time Frame	Lead Agency	Potential Funding Sources
1	Paint new crosswalks and repaint faded existing crosswalks	Short-term	San Jose Public Works	General Fund; CDBG funds
2	Continue to install pedestrian-scaled lights on 24 th Street near East Santa Clara Street.	Long-term	San Jose Public Works	General Fund; CDBG funds
3	Repaint red curbs.	Short-term	San Jose Public Works	General Fund
4	Create medians on Julian at 33rd.	Long-term	San Jose Public Works; SJDOT	General Fund; Caltrans Grants
5	Consider cost/feasibility of in-pavement blinking lights at 33 rd and McKee.	Long-term	San Jose Public Works; SJDOT	Caltrans Grants; VTA/MTC grants
6	Add more bike racks at Anne Darling and San Jose High School.	Short-term	School principals	Grant funding through SR2S programs and SJDOT-led grants, VTA/MTC grants; MTC-CMAQ Funding
7	Wooster Ave. is anticipated to become a major pedestrian route over time but new sidewalks need to be installed since area was unincorporated.	Long-term	San Jose Public Works; SJDOT	General Fund; Caltrans Grants

Figure 17. Example of “implementation bridges” to advance community-identified priorities on streets around Anne Darling Elementary School

Source: “Safe Routes to School” Community Assessment Report, SJSU graduate student team, Spring 2011

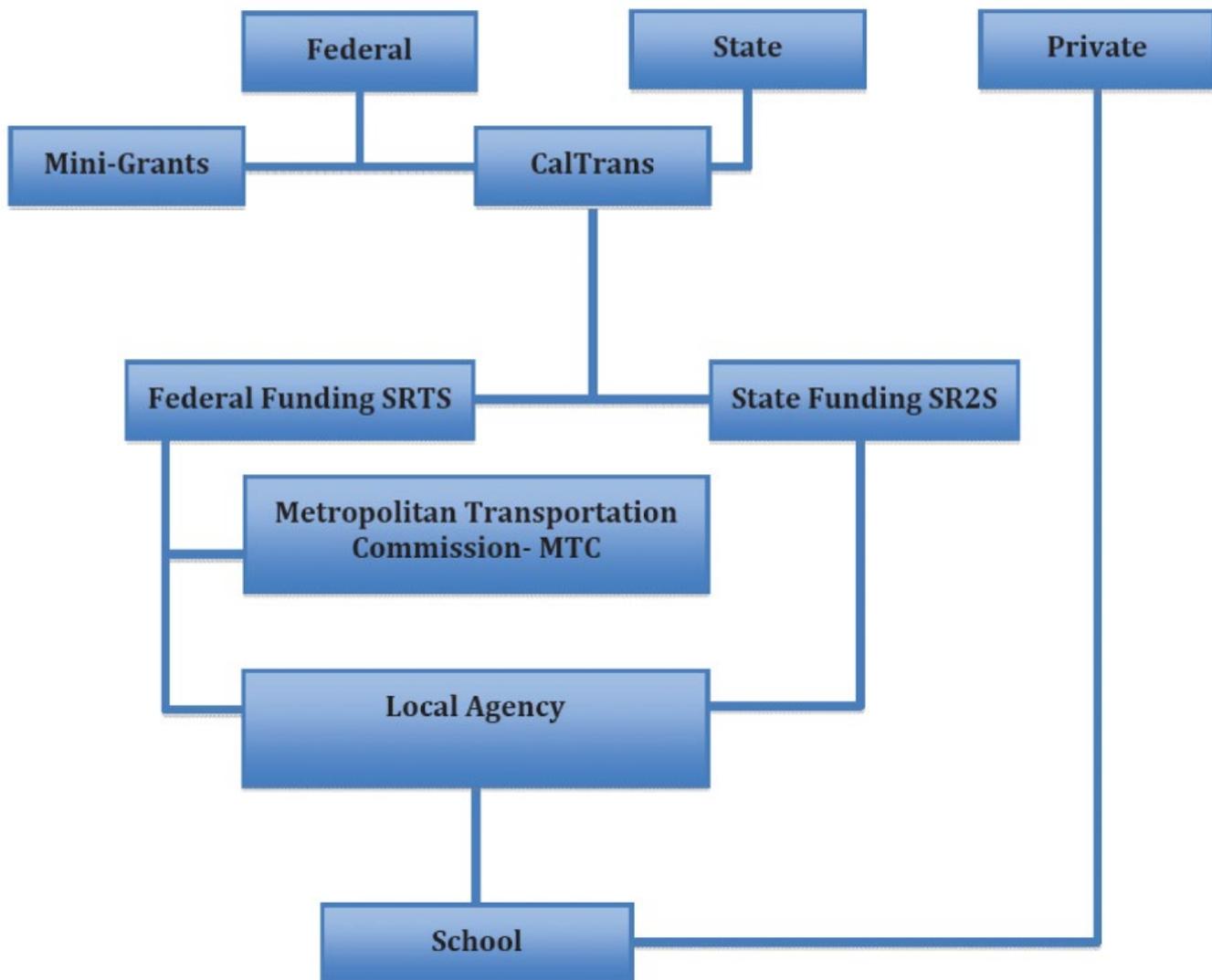


Figure 18. A notable outcome of the graduate students’ research was this flowchart to help school and community leaders visualize the various pathways through which Safe Routes to School funding might make their way to Anne Darling Elementary School.

Source: “Safe Routes to School” Community Assessment Report, SJSU graduate student team, Spring 2011

Within a year of completing the project at Anne Darling Elementary, the City of San José leveraged the student-produced maps and community-identified priorities to secure Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. \$99,000 was allocated to install three flashing beacons and two median islands to narrow crossing distances along local streets, and \$50,000 was destined for nearby San José High School to install embossed crosswalks and wheelchair ramps.

GIS Mapping and Analysis to Support the City of San José’s Walk n’ Roll Program

Nearly a decade after these successes at Anne Darling Elementary School, SJSU’s urban planning graduate students were invited to take part in another Safe Routes to Schools planning

effort. The City of San José's Walk n' Roll program works with the Vision Zero initiative and is modeled after the federal Safe Routes to School program, which aims to promote walking and biking among K – 12 students. Vision Zero is a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries, while increasing safe, healthy, equitable mobility for all. First implemented in Sweden in the 1990s, Vision Zero has proved successful across Europe — and now it is gaining momentum in major American cities.¹

Ann Jasper, the Walk n' Roll program manager, notes that more active transportation among students means better physical health, better focus while in the classroom, calmer traffic, and better air quality.² The program began in 2012 and currently serves almost 60 elementary and middle schools in twelve of San José's school districts. The ultimate goal is to support Walk n' Roll activities at all 250 public schools in San José. The program's proponents know that in order to increase walking and biking among students, there needs to be access to infrastructure that accommodates active transportation – including sidewalks, bike lanes, and spaces that minimize conflict between cars, pedestrians and bicyclists. Disadvantaged communities historically do not feature walk/bike-friendly infrastructure and securing funding to address this inequity is often met through state and federal grants. Of the current “Six E's” of Safe Routes to School planning, the engineering “E,” which refers to building infrastructure that accommodates active transportation, is funded largely through state and federal grants.

Ann Jasper requested that SJSU graduate students in the Advanced Geographic Information Systems course prepare detailed maps and demographic data that would be critical to successful grant applications. She also invited the students to join in conversations with school staff, parents, and students to better understand physical conditions around four schools selected for this project: Bachrodt Elementary, Parkview Elementary, Sierramont Middle, and Valle Vista Elementary. Since this project was conducted in late 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, these conversations took place remotely and relied heavily on virtual meetings that used Google Street View to “walk” down the local streets.

Examples of the graduate students' final work is illustrated in figures 19 and 20 for Bachrodt Elementary School. The first shows the result of careful documentation during meetings with the school principal and parents. The hand-labeled map at the lower right of figure 19 shows the “talking points” sheet that the school community had been using to document unsafe areas for walking and cycling, highlighted in red. The remainder of the map shows how the students translated these findings into a clear depiction of physical conditions supplemented with photos of the particularly problematic areas. Figure 20 shows how the students broadened their analysis to look at Bachrodt Elementary in a larger spatial context. On a single sheet they integrated a great deal of valuable information for the Walk n' Roll team to consider when preparing grant applications: walking distances from the school, in blue (measured using Esri's Network Analyst GIS software), the locations of crime reports and registered sex offenders, and major highways that divide the school's attendance area into three rigidly separated portions.

¹ “What is Vision Zero?” Vision Zero Network. www.visionzeronetwork.org/about/what-is-vision-zero/ (accessed January 31, 2021).

² Ann Jasper, City of San José Walk n' Roll Program Manager, in “Project Objectives” RFP proposal to the SJSU URBP-279 graduate student team, August 2020.

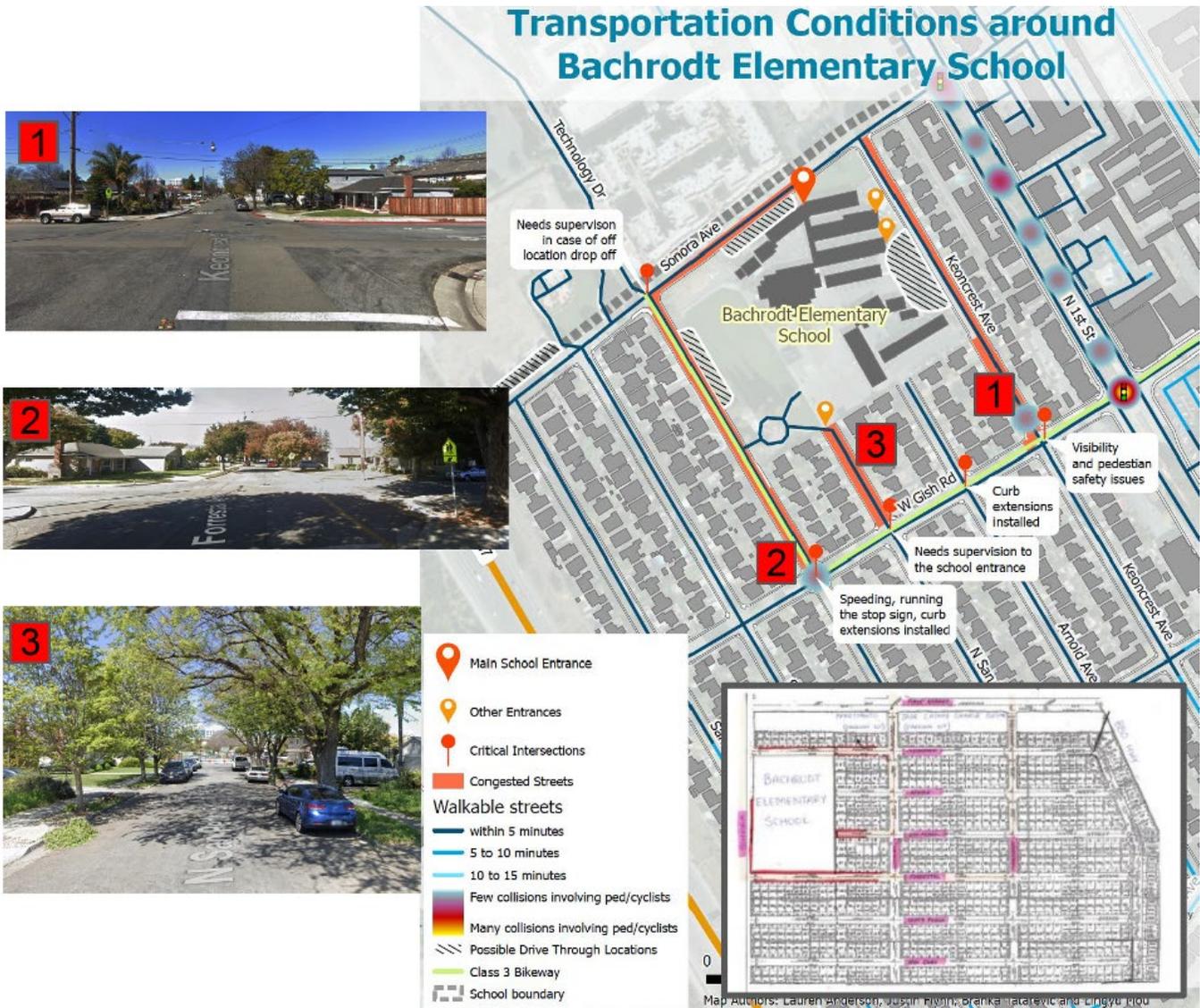


Figure 19. Depiction of local transportation conditions, including photographs of problematic intersections, parent-provided “hot spot” maps, and a visualization of physical conditions around Bachrodt Elementary School.

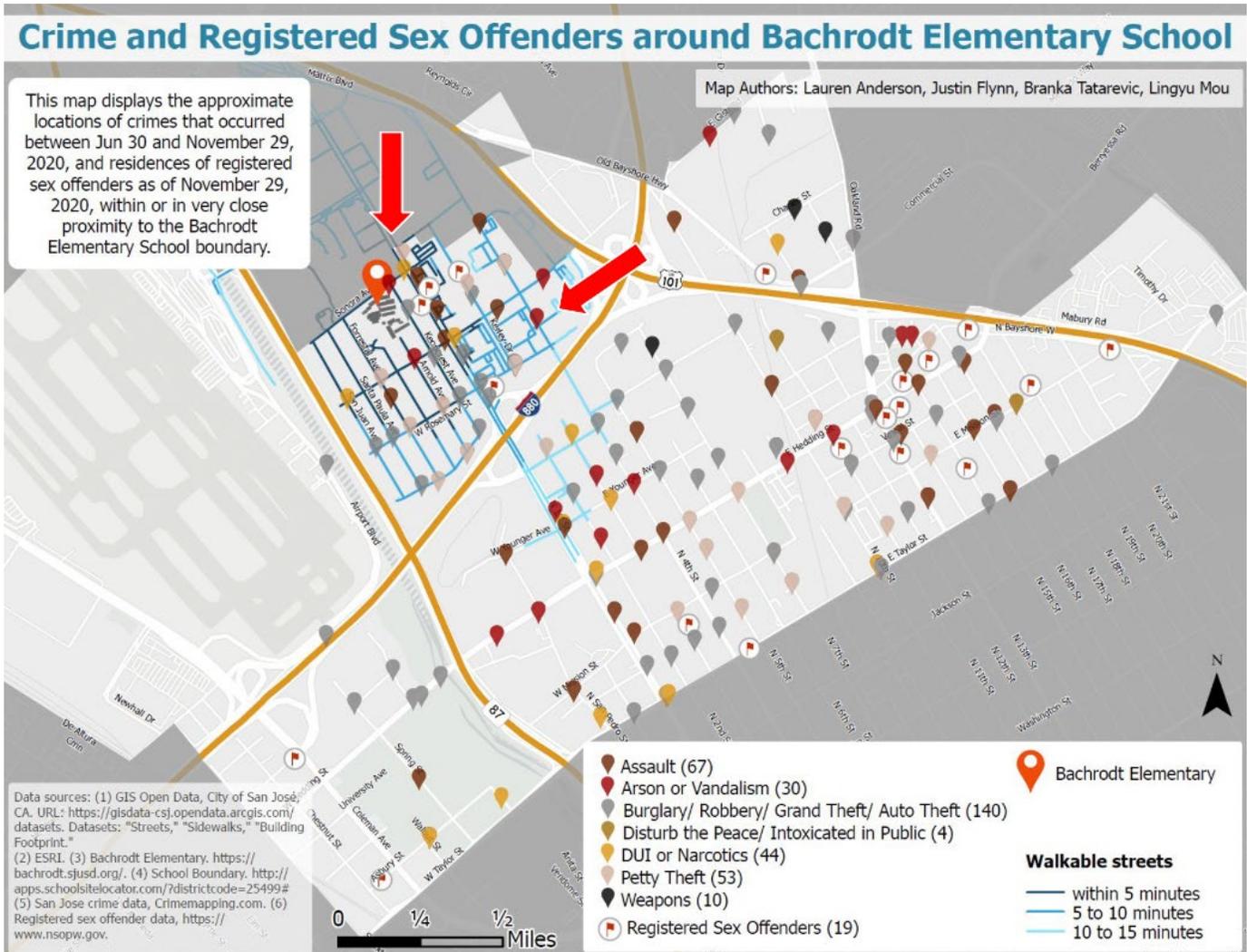


Figure 20. Responding to input from parents and school leaders, the graduate students prepared maps of recent crime locations and addresses of registered sex offenders.

Responding to Ann Jasper’s need for detailed demographic data to support Safe Routes grant applications, the graduate students prepared a series of infographics using Esri’s Community Analyst web mapping application to capture attributes such as educational attainment and income for various portions of the attendance area for the four schools; an example is shown in figure 21.

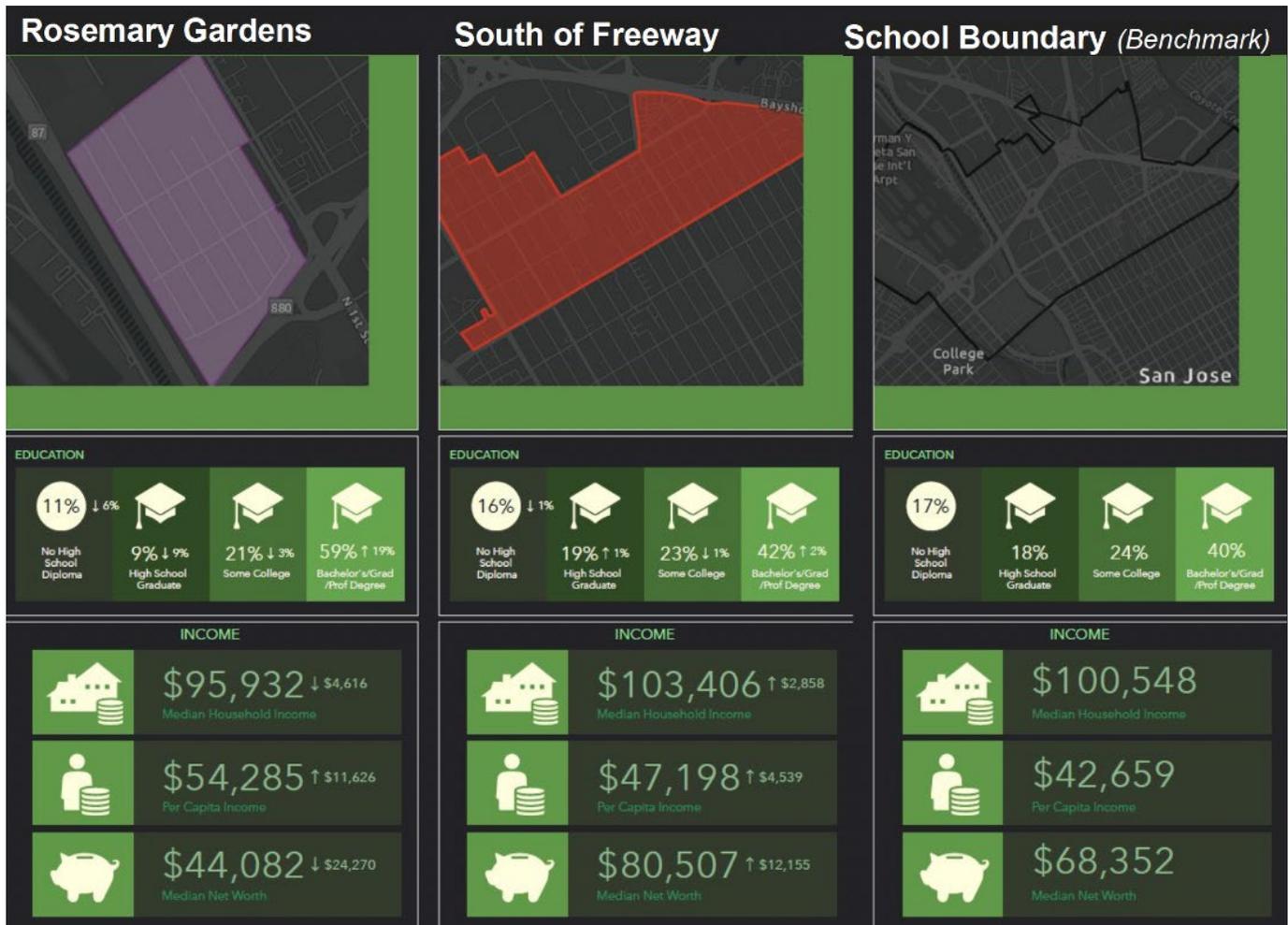


Figure 21. Demographic summaries in infographic format for areas surrounding Bachrodt Elementary School.

Another of the students' final products was a series of posters, tailored to each of the four schools, that is intended to be used by the school community to centralize discussions about walking and biking conditions in the area. An example is shown in figure 22.

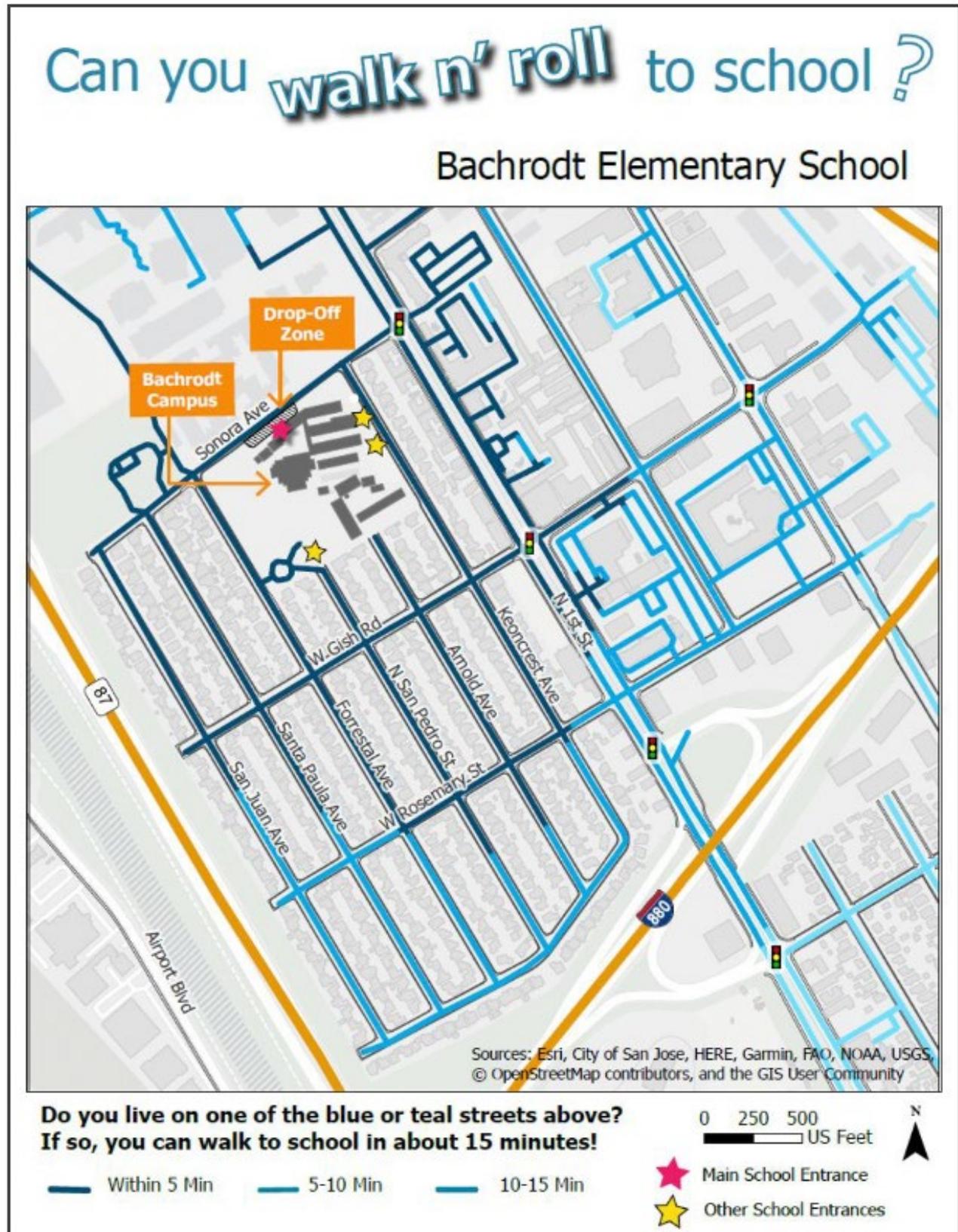


Figure 22. Detailed, yet “kid and parent accessible” poster of Bachrodt Elementary School and surrounding street conditions, designed to focus future discussions about Safe Routes planning.

The three deliverables illustrated above (detailed physical conditions maps, demographic data summaries, and posters to focus school community discussions), were produced for all four schools assigned to the students by the Walk n' Roll staff. After delivery of the final products, Ann Jasper shared that, "That is the most thorough analysis of active transportation routes I've seen! I love how [the students] included details about socioeconomic factors - it's critical to figuring out not only the safety, but personal security issues related to walking and biking. I feel that I can confidently present these maps to our Vision Zero team as well as the four schools."³

Factors Shaping Future Safe Routes to Schools Planning

Many discussions of Safe Routes to Schools planning mention the "Six E's" that shape these efforts: engagement, engineering, encouragement, education, evaluation, enforcement and, added in recent years, equity. During their research and interactions with the Anne Darling Elementary School community, the faculty and students remained cognizant of this long-established categorization scheme, though they found other frameworks more suitable to shape their community engagement methods, specifically the Asset-Based Community Development philosophy and the structured Collaborative Planning Model. These approaches were less relevant for the Walk n' Roll project since COVID-19 curtailed almost all opportunities to directly engage with community leaders on a sustained basis.

As mobility-focused projects such as Safe Routes move forward, it is important to bear in mind that the national non-profit Safe Routes Partnership made an important change to the "E's" in the middle of 2020, inspired by the tumultuous events of that year: they dropped "enforcement" and replaced it with "engagement". They explained their decision this way:

As part of the addition of Equity several years ago, the Safe Routes Partnership refocused the Enforcement E on community approaches to safety, understanding the deep issues that exist in many communities with law enforcement. While we have shifted our communications and guidance away from promoting police as a critical part of traffic safety initiatives, helped highlight the inequitable impacts of law enforcement on people of color, and promoted traffic and public safety strategies that do not involve police, we now know that that is not enough. Through an examination of what is within our organization's ability to change, and more importantly listening to our staff, organizational partners, and partners in the field, we know that approach is no longer sufficient. Being an anti-racist organization is a journey, not a destination, and we are committed to continuing to take clear and decisive steps to undo the systems that prevent Black people, indigenous people, and people of color from moving around the world safely, healthily, joyfully, and in their full expression of self.⁴

This important change will shape the service-learning work of future graduate urban planning students at San José State University and will undoubtedly lead to rich conversations amongst our highly diverse and equity-minded aspiring professional planners.

³ Email from Ann Jasper to Richard Kos and graduate student team, December 4, 2020.

⁴ "Dropping Enforcement from the Safe Routes to School 6 E's Framework", <https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/blog/dropping-enforcement-safe-routes-school-6-e%E2%80%99s-framework> (accessed January 4, 2021).

Sparking Longstanding Student Engagement in Community Planning

The work of the urban planning graduate students in the service-learning projects described in this report yielded a number of direct benefits that carried into their subsequent internships and careers:

- Exposure to real-world planning concepts and principles
- Involvement in the public participation process
- Skill development – integrating theory with practice
- Direct and regular feedback from faculty, community leaders, and professional planners
- Connections to professional planners, elected officials, and local community leaders

In order to document these benefits, CommUniverCity collects student reflections on the final day of service-learning courses to see how the completed project might influence their career paths. Recent representative responses include:⁵

“The challenges and motivations experienced during this community engagement have encouraged me to pursue new opportunities of community engagement activities in future.”

“Being able to relate and understand the implications of planning policy decisions first hand and from the community has provided me with a perspective that I will take with me in future endeavors.”

Quite a few CommUniverCity-affiliated planning students at San José State University secure internships and full-time positions working with the City of San José and partner organizations. Some alumni continue to collaborate with CommUniverCity on spin-off projects, and they tend to carry the “community first” premise of engagement with them, creating a “virtuous cycle.” One such alumnus, Nick Danty, now a Transportation Planner with the City of San José, explained the impact of service-learning projects on his career path this way:⁶

There were a few very important takeaways from the URBP 295 course that I have used in my professional life. First, the asset-based approach (compared to a needs-based approach) used throughout the course completely changed the way I looked at transportation and land use planning. Before taking the class, I was very quick to judge cities by their deficiencies instead of praising them for their strengths. This changed during my 295 class, where we focused on identifying all the positive elements of [a local neighborhood] by interviewing residents, researching the area’s history, and visiting the neighborhood for informal walks and, eventually, observational field work. Now in my current role, I have a much easier time gaining public support for my roadway projects by pointing out how they complement the neighborhood’s existing positive traits, instead of how they will fix a horrible problem created by someone else.

⁵ “Fifteen Years Creating Great Neighborhoods for Everyone” 2019-2020 CommUniverCity Annual Report. http://cucs.j.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CUCSJ-Annual-Report-19-20-5_FacingPages.pdf (accessed January 10, 2021).

⁶ Used with permission from Nick Danty granted via email to Richard Kos on January 10, 2021.

Nick went on to note additional benefits of his community engagement work at San José State University:

This class is probably the closest any urban planning student will come to experiencing a real-world planning effort prior to their first job. The safety fence created by the classroom is lowered, and you and your team have the opportunity to engage in meaningful decision making, conflict resolution, customer service, stakeholder communication, and project management. I am a firm believer in the value of data analytics, GIS, and graphic design in community planning, but in the end these are simply tools that must be supplemented with sharp interpersonal skills and concise communication.

Closing Thoughts

One of the primary missions of the California State University system, of which San José State is a part, is to “prepare significant numbers of educated, responsible people to contribute to California’s schools, economy, culture, and future.” The Department of Urban and Regional Planning puts this mission into practice through service-learning projects that engage students directly in the affairs of residents in the City of San José.

The two Safe Routes to Schools projects highlighted in this report demonstrate how the power of multi-sector partnerships, coupled with the available time, motivations, and idealism of university students, can have long-lasting impacts for a major U.S. city that is in the process of redressing safety problems wrought by decades of auto-centric street designs. Perhaps this report may encourage similar efforts across the nation in communities that are fortunate to have a nearby university with faculty and students committed to the welfare of their host cities.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank MTI staff, including Executive Director Karen Philbrick, PhD; Deputy Executive Director Hilary Nixon, PhD; Communications & Operations Manager Irma Garcia, for giving me this opportunity to boast about the inspiring work of my graduate students. Additional thanks go to the author's dedicated urban planning graduate students in the spring 2011 and fall 2020 semesters, including Branka Tatarevic, Justin Flynn, and Sue-Ellen Katz Atkinson, all of whom participated in an MTI-sponsored webinar related to this report on February 16, 2021. I also appreciate Lisa Rose for her wonderfully detailed copyediting for this report. Finally, a tip of the hat to my friends and kindred spirits at CommUniverCity San José including Executive Director Katherine Cushing and Community Director Imelda Rodriguez.

About the Author

Richard M. Kos, AICP, is a certified Urban Planner; Lecturer, Graduate Advisor, and Practitioner in Residence in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at San José State University. Richard has collaborated with over 200 graduate students in service-learning projects since starting with the department in 2007.

This report can be accessed at
transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2061



MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology and by Caltrans. The Institute is located within San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business.