



CASE STUDY

City Heights Skate Park

OCTOBER 2013

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

A primary tenet of the **Building Healthy Communities** initiative is that place matters, i.e. where one lives determines how one fares in health, safety and well-being. The 14 communities that are a part of **Building Healthy Communities** have long histories dealing with policies that have institutionalized class, race and ethnic disparities in education, health and human services, and local government planning decisions. “Health Happens Here” is both a guiding principle and a rallying cry for BHC sites addressing these entrenched disparities.

In this case study series, we explore successes, opportunities, challenges and transitions experienced “in place” as communities endeavor to create and sustain healthy communities for children and families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our gratitude goes to the City Heights Youth Council members, skaters, community leaders and city officials profiled in this study for their valuable insights on community organizing, leadership, partnership, and the critical importance of community voice in effective public planning. We wish to thank Adam Ward, lead author, and media specialist for his work on this case study and TCE Program Manager, Steve Eldred, for his strategic support of the effort.



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Building Healthy Communities

Building Healthy Communities (BHC) is a 10-year, \$1 billion program of The California Endowment (TCE). Fourteen communities across the state are working to create places where children are healthy, safe and ready to learn. BHC is focused on prevention and strategies aimed at changing community institutions, policies and systems. In BHC, a focus on systems change requires work across sectors with multiple stakeholders. Through this cross-sector collaboration and with youth and resident engagement, BHC sites seek to improve neighborhood safety, unhealthy environmental conditions, access to healthy foods, education, housing, employment opportunities and more.

All BHC sites began with a planning process. During that time, sites were responsible for multiple, complex tasks. They were to work with an initial host organization (fiscal agent) selected by the Foundation that would provide guidance during planning. The host organization would remain neutral and select an independent facilitator to support all planning efforts. After forming an initial steering committee and workgroups, they created governance and decision making structures.



Local leadership worked with TCE Program Managers who were embedded in each site to assist with rolling out the process and enable the connection with local systems leaders and policy makers. To determine priorities and strategies, each site created a logic model and implementation plan focused on 10 initiative-wide, predetermined outcomes. The logic model included targeted strategies to change four systems that impact the wellbeing of children, youth and families: health, human services, education, and community environments. Each site formed a “Hub” to serve as the central table through which implementation efforts would be coordinated.

Since 2010, BHC sites have experienced a number of important successes. However, every initiative comes with timelines, deliverables and structures that can be challenging for communities, and BHC is no different. BHC finds its roots in large scale, complex, community change initiatives, so any narrative has to acknowledge that complexity and include the many perspectives that reflect it. The multiple perspectives in these case studies are those of institutional leaders, residents, organizers, facilitators and TCE staff.

Read more about Building Healthy Communities at www.calendow.org.

Introduction

“ I still have a scar on my hip and a scar on my arm. ”
Marcos Olascoaga, City Heights high school student



Marcos Olascoaga was a typical City Heights high school student riding his skateboard home from school—then everything changed. An SUV came through an alley and sent the 16-year-old Marcos to the hospital.

“I was riding down the sidewalk, and this guy was coming out of a driveway,” he said, describing the event that happened in 2011. The SUV hit Marcos hard on his left hip. He flew onto the street. He was bleeding and a bystander got out of her car to help him. Despite being injured, he managed to make it the rest of the way home.

“I told my mom what happened, and she was scared,” he said. “My sister started crying.” His family immediately took him to the emergency room. Physicians examined him and determined that he didn’t have any internal injuries or broken bones.

He carries reminders of that day, though.

“I still have a scar on my hip and a scar on my arm as well,” he said.

Perhaps as lasting as those scars, will be the movement he started. Marcos is a member of the Mid-City CAN Youth Council, and the accident made him question why he had to skateboard on the streets.

“I realized what I really wanted to do—get a safe place, a safe skatepark—for people here in City Heights,” he said.

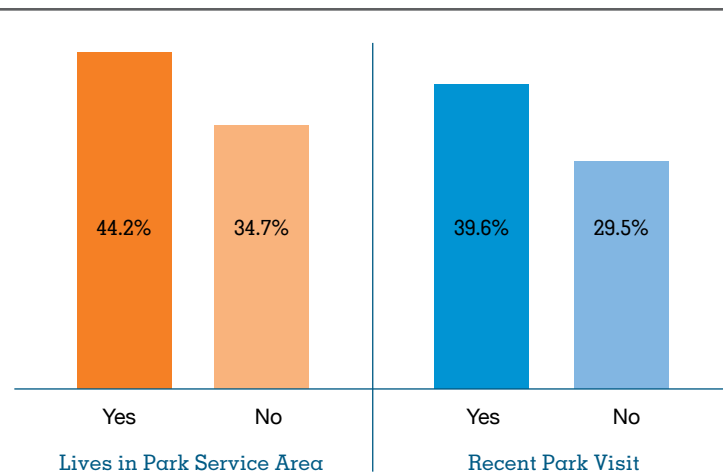
City Heights is a relatively small area—about seven square miles and densely populated with about 85,000 residents. The population is much greater when including estimates of the undocumented immigrants who call it home.

The 35 to 40 core Youth Council members were inspired by Marcos’ vision. His realization became a full-blown Youth Council campaign. It would occupy the Youth Council members for several years, as they became advocates for more park space.

Background: 100 Acres Short

Matthew Hervey with Price Charities, who studied park space in City Heights, said the area doesn't come close to the more than 220 acres of usable parkland it should have. City guidelines say there should be 2.8 acres of parkland for every 1,000 people. Hervey came up with the number using a conservative 80,000 resident population for the area. "What we found is it was significantly less, about a hundred acres less, give or take, depending on what exactly you consider usable parkland," he said. Regular exercise and a nutritious diet are key ways to prevent obesity and stay healthy, as noted in a March 2013 study by Susan H. Babey, a UCLA Center for Health Policy Research scientist and co-director of the Chronic Disease Program. Lack of exercise can contribute to recurring health problems like diabetes and coronary heart disease.

Percentage of Adolescents with Five or More Days of At Least 60 Minutes of Physical Activity by Park Access and Park Use, Ages 12-17, California, 2009*



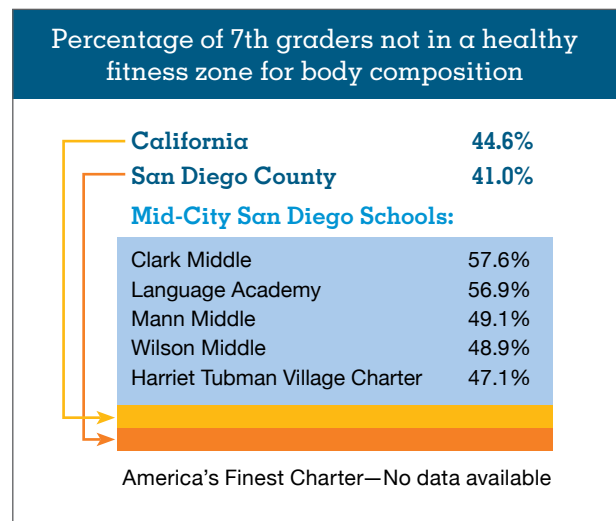
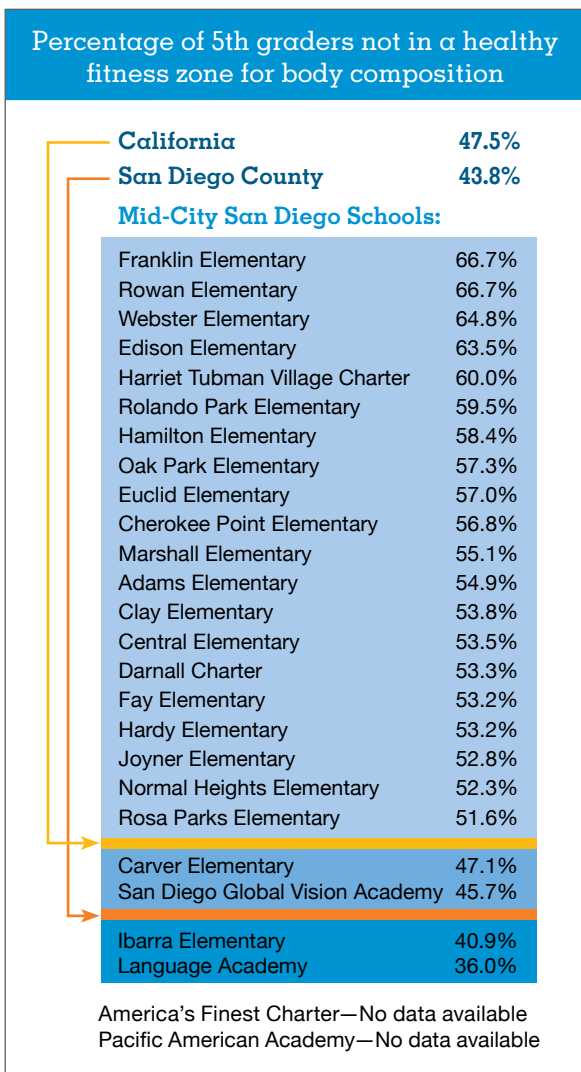
One barrier to residents using outdoor park areas for recreation and exercise is safety. The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research study found that teens who live near parks are more likely to engage in physical activities like playing sports for at least one hour a day—as long as these parks are safe. "Teens' perceptions of the safety of their local parks likely plays an important role in whether teens use their parks, regardless of income," Babey said. "But safety of local parks is an issue particularly for low-income teens because they are more likely to perceive local parks as unsafe."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, since almost 40 percent of families in City Heights with children younger than 18 live in poverty, young people in City Heights are much more likely to feel that nearby parks are not safe at night compared to the average San Diego resident. Only 26 percent of children and teens in City Heights said that a "nearby park or playground is safe at night," compared with 52 percent who agreed with that statement in San Diego County and 48 percent statewide, according to a study by UCLA's Center for Health Policy Research.

*Source: 2009 California Health Interview Survey and the California Protected Areas Database

While City Heights residents may lack safe park space, they have easy access to high-calorie food and drinks. “Within seven square miles of City Heights, there are nearly 60 fast-food restaurants, 40 convenience stores and 120 liquor vendors,” according to a 2011 Health Equity by Design report. With this kind of environment, it hardly seems surprising that a large percentage of 5th and 7th graders in the Mid-City area of San Diego, which includes City Heights, would not be in the Healthy Fitness Zone, as the two charts below—prepared by The Children’s Initiative—illustrate. The Healthy Fitness Zone includes measurements of body mass index, and running, strength and flexibility tests. These measures are important because they offer protections against diseases resulting from sedentary lifestyles.

Youth Council members may have been inspired by Marcos and his accident, but they knew that environment of City Heights has many more dangers to their long-term health than SUVs.



Source: California Department of Education, 2012 PFT Statewide Research Files <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/pf/pftresearch.asp>

Youth Council Members Push For Inclusion Of Skate Plaza In New Park Plan

As the Youth Council began planning, its members realized they had to educate themselves about everything from urban planning to the political landscape of San Diego's newly created City Council District 9. Despite all the homework required, Marcos' dream kept them motivated.

Beginning in the summer of 2011, dozens of Youth Council members went to several planning meetings to speak about their vision for a new "mini park" in City Heights. But government officials were slow to include their ideas. The officials finally created three design variations for Central Avenue Mini Park, near the corner of Central Avenue and Landis Street, but only one included any skateboard specific features.



Youth Council members and allies packed the Recreation Council meeting on Nov. 15, 2011, about the Central Avenue Mini Park. The Youth Council presented a petition with 300 signatures asking that the city build a skatepark. Esteban Barron, 11, explained the need this way. "A skate plaza would be a safer place for youth—or anybody—to skate," he said.

The city finally approved the plan with 6,500 square feet of the park that would become a "skate plaza." The major difference between a skate plaza and a skatepark is that a plaza is smaller and contains above-ground—often-removable—features, like ramps and rails.

At first, Youth Council members opposed creating a skate plaza in the mini park, fearing that it would steal energy from its campaign to create a larger park. After researching other parks and assessing local skaters' needs, the Youth Council created a vision for the skate plaza and a large skatepark with various structures appropriate for all levels of skateboarder.



“In the beginning we were thinking small,” said Angeli Hernandez, a 19-year-old Youth Council member. “We only wanted one skatepark for our community, and so we wanted it to be perfect. But as the group learned how “underparked” City Heights is, it created a new strategy for its campaign. “Why limit ourselves to one skatepark when we deserve many?” she said the Youth Council members asked themselves.



“The skate plaza is not as big of an area as skaters would like, but it’s a start,” said Terry Stanley, 19, who is an avid skateboarder and member of the Youth Council. “And it is a bigger step to community involvement.” But could the group convince the city to build it? The plan for Central Avenue Mini Park now included a phase two skate plaza project, but that didn’t mean it would actually be built. It didn’t have a definitive timeline or funding source.

“As far as the skatepark plaza, that’s not part of the budgeted amount” for the park, said Samir Mahmalji, Senior Engineer with the City of San Diego San Diego, in November 2012. This was a bad sign for the skate plaza’s future. Daniela Barron, 17, and a student at Hoover High School expressed some of the Youth Council’s concerns. “Well, basically, phase two never gets done,” she said. “We want to create both of them at the same time, so it can save money and time.” It was a strategy that sounded simple, but the political landscape in City Heights and San Diego made it anything but.

Youth Council Organizes District 9 City Council Candidate Debate

When San Diego redistricted its City Council seats, it created a new District 9 majority Latino district, which included City Heights. Even insiders weren't sure how it would shift local politics. The Youth Council didn't take any chances. On May 23, 2012, it organized a debate between the two candidates for the new district, Marti Emerald, who was then the councilmember for District 7 and businessperson Mateo Camarillo. Alfredo Mendez, 17, co-moderated the debate with the editor of Voice of San Diego, an investigative-journalism focused website.

Although the skatepark campaign was a big part of the event, the Youth Council designed it to address many youth issues.

"We want to ask the questions that really concern us: for our safety, for our education, and for our success," said Youth Council Member Jose Fernandez.

Rather than only accept the candidates promises, the Youth Council created four 3-foot-by-5-foot pledge cards that both candidates signed. The pledge cards focused on bringing youth jobs to City Heights, getting free youth bus passes, creating a District 9 youth advisory group and creating a City Heights skatepark.

The Youth Council would later call upon this skatepark pledge by Marti Emerald, who won the District 9 council seat, to make sure that a skate plaza was one of her top priorities in the new district.



“ We want to ask the questions that really concern us: for our safety, for our education, and for our success. ”

Jose Fernandez, Youth Council Member

‘We have a big demand. We need to find a location that works.’

Skateboarding doesn’t have an age limit. Mid-City Skatepark Advocacy Group describes itself as “a group of community folks who would like to see one or more skateparks built in the Mid-City area of San Diego, likely in City Heights.” It includes adult skaters whose day jobs include everything from running restaurants to graphic design. The group has supported the Youth Council in its work, most notably at the Colina (Park) Night Out in August 2012. The event was part of National Night Out, which began in 1984, as a community-led crime prevention event.

At the event, the Skatepark Advocacy Group organized a skating demonstration that turned a flat area at the park into a skate plaza for several hours with portable rails and ramps. About 20 Youth Council members also used the event to raise awareness for their campaign. They signed people up for their email list and had young people color paper cutouts of skateboards as a way to engage them. The activities were fun, but the message of the Youth Council was serious.

“Outside the library, we always see skaters trying to skate there, and they are always hurting themselves,” said Cynthia Hernandez, 16 and a Youth Council member. “With a skatepark, ... it’s going to be safer for everybody.”

Dennis Stein, one of the leaders of the Skatepark Advocacy Group, said momentum was building. “We have a lot of support,” he said. “We have a big demand. We need to find a location that works for skatepark central.” That demand was coming to a head and the Youth Council was shaping it.

“ With a skatepark, ... it’s going to be safer for everybody. ”

Cynthia Hernandez (16)
Youth Council Member



San Diego Leaders Pledge Action



In December 2012, the young people in the Youth Council decided to ensure that the skatepark campaign wasn't losing ground. They staged a rally at Cherokee Point Elementary School with the support of Mid-City Skatepark Advocacy Group to demand a new skatepark and more safe places to exercise in City Heights. More than 300 City Heights residents attended and endorsed their vision.

A large media turnout documented the event and spread the word that residents of one of the lowest-income areas of San Diego were getting organized. Rally attendees created a new motto for the Youth Council's skatepark campaign that echoed Cesar Chavez, "¡Skate se puede!" San Diego leaders, including the newly sworn-in mayor, promised to help. The then President of San Diego Unified School District's Board of Education pledged his full support at the rally. "Know that you've got the support of the entire school district—the entire school board," said Richard Barrera. "Our schools are open to you to do your planning and your visioning. We support you 100 percent."

The principal of Cherokee Point Elementary School, Godwin Higa, has a long-term perspective about how a skatepark in the neighborhood could create a healthier future. "We've got to do something about our kids being on the streets—it is so unsafe," Principal Higa said at the rally. "I've been working for four years—this is my fifth year—trying to get a skatepark somewhere close to this area." The Youth Council also unveiled its preferred location for a skatepark in City Heights—in the empty lot across from the Copley YMCA, where 38th Street deadends.

“ Nobody shows up for a meeting on a recreational issue like that. ”

Peter Whitley, Program Director, The Tony Hawk Foundation, referring to the large crowd gathered at Mid-City CAN skatepark rally at Cherokee Point Elementary School where “the seats were full to the back.”

One of the unforeseen outcomes of the skatepark rally was the buzz it created in other advocacy groups. Peter Whitley, programs director at The Tony Hawk Foundation, has extensive experience supporting new skateparks. The Tony Hawk Foundation made 500 skatepark grants during 10 years and about 420 of those parks are open, according to Whitley. Whitley personally logged more than a thousand requests for skatepark consultation in 2012.

Whitley said he never saw anything like the Mid-City CAN skatepark rally at Cherokee Point Elementary School. “Nobody shows up for a meeting on a recreational issue like that,” Whitley said, referring to the large crowd at the event where “the seats were full to the back.” Those type of crowds are unheard of in urban-planning meetings, he said “It doesn’t happen for a stadium,” he said. “It doesn’t happen for softball fields or anything—swimming pools or waterslides. You are breaking new ground and setting precedents that the city isn’t accustomed to. ... There is a lot of excitement there.”

One of the questions that supporters struggled with was cost. Former city officials cited high construction costs in articles about the proposed park. Whitley had a different view. “\$40 a square foot is an industry high average,” he said. “So there are lots of ways to cut corners on that, in-kind donations ... but essentially, if you budget in preliminarily at \$40 per square foot, you are going to end up with a pretty kick-ass skatepark.” This figure is from “deck to deck,” Whitley said, and would not include landscaping, benches, lighting, parking or other improvements. “Given the relative inexpensiveness of skateparks, compared to anything else that the parks department wants to do with their money, they should be able to put this on a faster track,” Whitley said. “I think you could probably get concrete poured in the ground by at least the end of 2013.”

The Youth Council’s efforts also create a huge buzz in the larger skating community. “A lot is going on in Mid-City, we are really excited about this opportunity,” Whitley said at the Cherokee Point skatepark rally. “Tony Hawk talks about it. All the pro-skaters that show up talk about it—it’s just a matter of time.”



Tony Hawk chats with City Heights Youth Council members at Tony Hawk’s *Stand Up For Skateparks* event.
Photo by Christopher Donez

Youth Council Talks To City Heights Advisory Groups

In March 2013, the time seemed to be right for a full-scale push to secure funding for completing the skate plaza at Central Avenue Mini Park. Its members decided to make their case before two advisory groups in City Heights, in the hope that they would recommend to City Council that it combine the two phases of the Central Avenue Mini Park construction, which would include a skate plaza.

Representatives of the Youth Council talked to the City Heights Area Planning Committee, which is set up to give community input on land-use decisions. It also addressed the City Heights Town Council, a nonprofit that is a central hub for neighborhood groups. Groups like these had long promoted building a skatepark in City Heights.

But this process proved trickier than the Youth Council anticipated. On the first night, the Planning Committee recommended to the City Council “that they consider allocating [fiscal year 2014] Mid-City Special Parks Funds to this project after taking account of the other prospective uses of those funds” – a lukewarm endorsement at best. “I think we accomplished half of what we wanted to,” said Leslie Renteria, 15. She, like many, saw the recommendation as a lack of support for the skate plaza, and potentially enough to stall the project. “We got a lot of support, but we didn’t really get what we wanted,” said Youth Council Member Alejandra Diaz, 16. “We wanted them to say ‘Oh yeah, we support you.’”

But despite the setback at the Planning Committee, the Youth Council members knew a safe park space designed to include the interests of young people was too important to give up on. “It’s important to me because me personally I don’t really feel safe in the streets,” said Erick Hernandez, 13. “If we get a skatepark, we would be safer. It will be our own environment, our own bubble.”

The next night the Youth Council gave a similar presentation to Town Council, which agreed to support the young people’s vision of a skate plaza being built at the same time as the rest of the park. “The skatepark is ... a healthy, safe place to exercise,” said Angeli Hernandez, 19. “It’s a recreation opportunity for all youth.” Roberto Torres, 17, said that night was important because “it shows the support of the Town Council for the skatepark, and that’s one step closer.” But Torres also appreciates how the group members were gaining advocacy experience and a sense of their own effectiveness.

“ Personally, I support this not because I am a skater, but because I support youth and because I want youth to have power. ”

Robert Torres, Youth Council Member

An Unexpected Funding Source: \$846,950 For The Skate Plaza

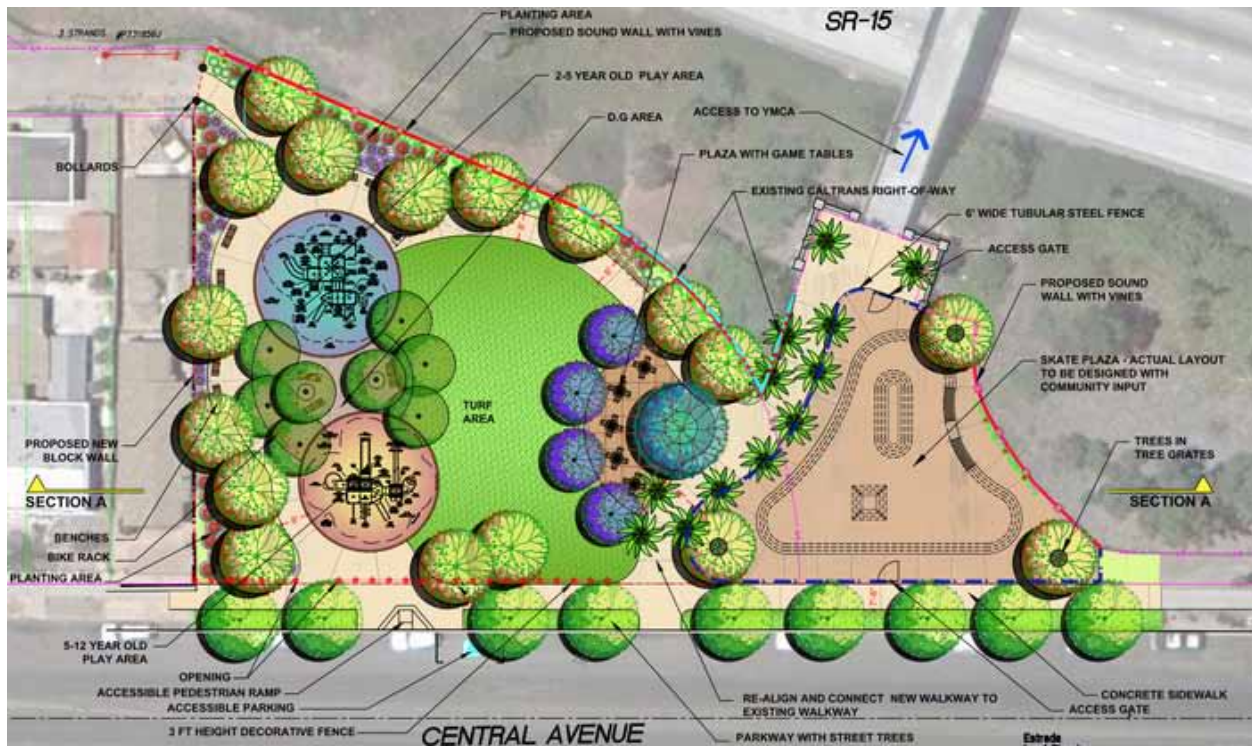
After the City Heights Area Planning Committee advised giving funding to the skate plaza only after looking at all other potential uses for the money, the efforts to ensure upfront funding for both phases seemed to have lost momentum. However, government officials were feeling the pressure. San Diego Development Services identified state funding for the Central Avenue Mini-Park skate plaza. “This funding will allow for the completion of both phases of the Central Avenue Mini Park Project at this time,” wrote Brian Schoenfisch, senior planner with development services, on April 4, 2013. Schoenfisch said using the money for the plaza was a result of the Youth Council’s work. “That’s what I love about this project—the kids were really brilliant in how they brought it to the city’s attention,” he said.



Cherokee Point Elementary School Principal Higa was encouraged but not satisfied by the announcement. “This is a great start, but the goal is to get a park versus a plaza—Mid-City kids need that,” he said.

The Youth Council members hope that the skate plaza will only be the beginning. It could be the start of more parks in this area of San Diego, which is park deficient. It could start keeping kids safer, by keeping them away from vehicles. It could be the start of more places to exercise, giving young people and adults a better chance in the battle against obesity. And it could be the start of improving health and better supporting it in City Heights.

Skate plaza by the numbers



Location: Near the corner of Central Avenue and Landis Street, where the pedestrian bridge crosses Interstate 15. (The path from the bridge to the sidewalk will move.)

Construction begins: October 2014
Construction finishes: November 2015

Size: 0.64 acres

Park includes:

- Tot lot for 2- to 5-year-olds
- Playground for 5- to 12-year-olds
- Open turf area
- Plaza with games, landscaping, and trees

Skate plaza size: 0.145 acres

- Makes up approximately 23 percent of the 0.64-acre site
- “The skate plaza is going to be a little bit less than 6,500 square feet of this overall park.” (Stacey LoMedico, Director, San Diego Park and Recreation)

Source: San Diego City Council District 9 office

Skatepark campaign timeline

- Aug. 16, 2011** First of several meetings with City of San Diego Public Works Department about proposed improvements at Central Avenue Mini Park
- April 6, 2012** Youth Council investigate a possible skatepark location with a site analysis visit to Colina del Sol Park
- May 23, 2012** Youth Council members have City Council “Candidates Forum—District 9” at Hoover High School Auditorium
- May 29, 2012** City Heights’ then City Councilmember Todd Gloria, who is now Council President, meets with the Youth Council at the Mid-City CAN offices and agrees to support the campaign
- June 11, 2012** Youth Council members talk about the need for a skatepark in City Heights at San Diego City Council meeting
- Aug. 7, 2012** The Youth Council raises awareness about the need for a skatepark in City Heights at Colina Night Out
- Sept. 21, 2012** Youth Council turn an unused parking lot into a park as part of Park(ing) Day—a global event that challenges the amount of urban space devoted to vehicles.
- Oct. 4, 2012** Youth Council Members Roberto Torres and Jorge Robles as well as Mid-City CAN staff and Mid-City Skatepark Advocates talk to City Councilmember Marti Emerald
- Nov. 1, 2012** The Youth Council wins an International MarCom marketing and communications award for its video about Marcos’ skateboarding accident
- Nov. 29, 2012** The Youth Council takes Built Environment Education Program training to better understand the requirements for a skatepark and get a basic understanding of urban planning
- Dec. 6, 2012** Youth Council members have a skatepark rally with more than 300 supporters at Cherokee Point Elementary School
- March 4, 2013** The Youth Council makes its case before the City Heights Area Planning Committee to combine both phases of the Central Avenue Mini Park construction
- March 5, 2013** The Youth Council presents to City Heights Town Council the following night to ask it to support combining both phases of the Central Avenue Mini Park construction
- April 4, 2013** San Diego Development Services memo identifies funding for the Central Avenue Mini Park skate plaza
- June 1, 2013** Mid-City CAN and San Diego City Council co-host a media event to announce full funding for the Central Avenue Mini Park Skate Plaza
- June 21, 2013** Youth Council members organized “Go Skateboarding Day.” They set up boxes, ramps and rails by the City Heights branch library, giving residents a vision of how the skate plaza might look

‘We will have a skatepark matched by none other’

The shift of San Diego’s power center from downtown interests to communities, like City Heights, might have reached its peak when City Councilmember Emerald asked the Youth Council to co-host a media event announcing the funding deal for the skate plaza. About 30 members of the media and City Heights residents came together on June 1, 2013 to hear the announcement and although the speaker list included the representatives of several foundations and city officials, the keynote was by a member of the Youth Council: Terry Stanley. The culmination of the Youth Council’s work meant that the first skate plaza in City Heights would be at the Central Avenue Mini Park.



“The announcement is a big accomplishment for us because as a skater—myself for six years—it’s hard to skate around City Heights.”

Terry Stanley (19), Youth Council Member

Stanley said he knew that the park’s impact would go beyond adding a few thousand square feet of outdoor exercise space. “It shows that youth have a voice and are being heard,” he said.

San Diego City Council President Todd Gloria, who represented part of City Heights before redistricting, explained why even a small park like this is so important for City Heights. “We know that City Heights is incredibly park deficient,” he said. “A recent study showed that we are 40 percent below the target acreage in this community when it comes to parks.” City Councilmember Emerald said the deal to move state funding for the plaza was “a kind of stroke of serendipity. Not only did it pay for this park, that \$846,000 state grant will help us set aside money for the big skatepark which will be located behind Cherokee Point, ... where the old Copley YMCA is now. So stay tuned!”

Emerald recalled the District 9 debate in May 2012, hosted by the Youth Council, and its critical role in securing funding for the City Heights skate plaza. “We met with Mid-City CAN kids and they had a pledge that they wanted us to sign,” she said. “I signed that pledge. Together we have made something happen that has been years and years in the making.”

Steve Eldred, City Heights program manager for The California Endowment, put the work in a statewide context of the Building Healthy

Communities Initiative, a 10-year, \$1 billion effort by the Endowment to change the way Californians think about and support health in 14 different communities, including City Heights. Mid-City CAN is the coordinator of that work in City Heights. “The California Endowment is committed to creating or supporting communities for children that are healthy and safe and ready to learn,” he said. “We are really excited about the progress we’ve seen.”

Price Charities, a City Heights-focused foundation, is also a supporter of the Youth Council. “Mid-City CAN led what is now a community-wide effort to build parks in this community that is one of the most overpopulated and underparked areas of the city,” said Tad Seth Parzen, executive director at City Heights Partnership for Children and executive vice-president at Price Charities.

Despite achieving a milestone, the Youth Council’s Stanley knows that the work isn’t done, but “it is a bigger step to community involvement,” he said.



Enabling The People Who Live In City Heights To Be In Charge

What Mid-City CAN is attempting to do is enable the people who live in City Heights to be in charge of how their community develops. Mid-City CAN’s methodology is not to be advocates, but to enable residents to advocate for themselves. Mid-City CAN is developing community members’ capacity to participate in local government and decision-making. This process includes holding politicians, funders and community-based organizations accountable. The Youth Council is a resident-driven project. It involves educating young people and building their leadership abilities. The approach is similar to other Mid-City CAN work groups –called momentum teams—but with the added layer that the team is made up of people as young as 10.

The most important part, as adults, is stepping back and letting the young people be the decision-makers. Young people chose a skatepark campaign—partly because Marcos was hit by an SUV and partly because of the need caused by the park-deficient environment in City Heights. It became a rally point for the group. Part of the process is reframing adults’ assumptions about young people and really seeing youth as people—instead of kids. It also means trusting them in their decisions and allowing them to learn through the process of success and failure.

When that happens, adults are impressed by young people’s drive, their maturity, their analysis about what’s happening. Most young people only see opportunities and they’re not daunted by obstacles. In so many conversations, adults limit their vision. Young people don’t feel limited. When young people encounter obstacles they just say, ‘Well, how can we get around them?’



‘Community organizers — and not in the making — they are the real deal.’



Youth Council members have become experts at advocating for a healthier City Heights. At a June 2013 City Council meeting, Councilmember Emerald again recognized their work. “I want to thank all the young people that have really put their heart and soul into this community,” she said. “These are community organizers—and not in the making—they are the real deal.”

Seemingly, everyone, from City Heights residents to politicians believe that a full-sized skatepark is on the horizon. “Kids from all over the city are going to be coming to City Heights, because we will have a skatepark matched by none other,” as Emerald said on June 1.

Youth Council member Marcos was happy to learn about the deal to fund the skate plaza from California State University, Chico, in Northern California. “It just shows how much work [the Mid-City CAN Youth Council members] are putting in,” he said. Although Marcus is proud to be one of the first members of his immediate family to go to college, it has been a bittersweet experience to watch much of the skatepark campaign from far away. He receives frequent updates from his sister, Rosa Olascoaga, 16, who is a Youth Council member, and through social media. The group’s project impresses him.

“Now I feel like, it’s the time to have it ready, to get it done—to see it in the streets instead of just on paper,” Marcos said on a recent visit from Northern California.

He has a long-term perspective on the effort, and the transformation that the Youth Council has undergone as part of its advocacy efforts. For one thing, when he was an active member, the group hadn’t even explored ideas like how to pay for a skatepark.

A year later, “they are getting funded to get a skate plaza,” he said.

Besides Marcos, his sister, Rosa is one of a handful of Youth Council members who has seen the entire skatepark campaign. She still has a vivid memory of taking her brother to the hospital after he was by an SUV almost three years ago. That accident “pushed us forward, just to continue it, and then we started working with Mid-City CAN,” she said. “It seemed like the whole Youth Council was on board for the skatepark, which was really good.” The official announcement of the skate plaza filled her with pride. “All the hard work that all of us as a Youth Council have put in, it actually [got] results,” she said.

Cherokee Point Elementary School Principal Higa hopes the skate plaza leads to a skatepark. “I’m so happy that we are now thinking about the safety and wellbeing of our kids on the street. This is just the start to me. We have thousands of kids we want to get off the street for safety reasons.”

Other young people have shorter perspectives. Terry Stanley can hardly believe the Youth Council helped get the first skate plaza built in City Heights. “To announce the first one ever in City Heights is really big,” he said. For him, the plaza is a tribute to something that he loves. “Skating to me is like a form of art, to escape reality and just to be creative,” he said.

Cynthia Hernandez, now 17, said, “I think it’s really cool how we struggled for this for two years and now it is actually going to happen.”

And for many City Heights young people, like Stephany Hernandez, 12, a Monroe-Clark Middle School student, being part of the Youth Council means family connections and healthy habits are being reinforced. “I’m not a skater, but I can ride a board,” she said. “And I like to go to skateparks with my brother. But for now, those trips are difficult. “It really takes a lot of effort to get there because we don’t have a car, and there is not a skatepark around here,” she said. She knows that in two years, “we will have a new skate plaza in City Heights,” and she and her brother will be able to exercise in City Heights as a family. Perhaps she will lead the group’s efforts to ensure that the skate plaza leads to more parks.



Go Skateboarding Day: A Vision of the Future

Far from being content with the success it has achieved, the Mid-City CAN Youth Council is staying active and promoting the need for more safe areas to exercise outdoors in City Heights. In June 2013, members decided to transform the service road behind the City Heights branch library into a skate plaza, complete with boxes, rails and ramps. The group teamed with two area skate shops to borrow the equipment and pulled the event off in about a week, mainly promoting it through social media, like Facebook, and word of mouth.

The event attracted about 40 hardcore skateboarders, push-scooter riders and bicyclists—with more than a hundred observers passing through and learning about the Youth Council’s vision for a healthier City Heights.

At the event, Youth Council members discussed their strategy and the future. Members were still eager to talk about the need for more park space. Alfonso Aguilar, said City Heights needs a skatepark, because “it takes kids out of trouble. It makes kids better at what they like: skateboarding, scootering, biking, whatever.”

The Youth Council’s Stanley took a moment to speculate about the future. “Now, we have to decide what other steps we need to take: What’s another problem in our community that we need to fix,” he said. “We got that skate [plaza]. We are not only building one, we are going to try [to] build multiples.”



Final Thoughts

The experiences and lessons of case studies illuminate both promising practices and challenges communities experience as they work to create systemic change and sustain healthy communities for children and families. Although each BHC community is unique and the experiences and lessons learned are specific to City Heights, there are themes dealing with leadership, research, collective action, and communication that can be applied to community change initiatives in other places.

Future case studies will continue to chronicle the stories of the 14 BHC communities throughout California as they focus on prevention and changing community norms for better health outcomes.



FOOTNOTE

- 1 Fudge, Tom. "City Heights Looks For More Places To 'Park.'" KPBS Public Broadcasting. June 7, 2012.
- 2 UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. "Three Questions for the Expert: Susan H. Babey, PhD" <http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/newsroom/three-questions/pages/detail.aspx?ExpertID=45>. March 2013.
- 3 2009 Claritas Census Projections
- 4 WalkSanDiego. "Healthy City Heights: A Resident's Guide" Health Equity by Design report. 2011.
- 5 Burks, Megan. "City Funds Some Half Pipes in City Heights." Speak City Heights. April 23, 2013.