

BOYLE HEIGHTS, CALIFORNIA

The Latino Urban Forum and residents of Boyle Heights create the Evergreen Cemetery Jogging Path to promote a safe, pedestrian-friendly environment



The city map of Boyle Heights, CA shows only two kinds of open spaces: freeway on- and off-ramps and a cemetery. But this didn't stop community organizers from creating an outdoor fitness area that promotes health by encouraging physical activity. With the help of the Latino Urban Forum, residents transformed a cracked sidewalk that ringed the Evergreen Cemetery into a 1.5 mile rubberized jogging path. The Evergreen Jogging Path Coalition (EJPC) worked intensively with city officials, emphasizing the need for capital improvements in the area, designing careful plans and securing materials. Six months later, in June 2003, the new path was in use, not only by Boyle Heights residents but also by people from neighboring communities.

THE PLACE

Boyle Heights, CA is a small, densely populated urban community east of downtown Los Angeles. Seventy-five percent of the city's 91,000 residents (US Census, 2000) were born outside of the US in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America (LA Department of City Planning), and most primarily speak Spanish or are bilingual. Residents' median income was just under \$21,500 in 2000 (US Census). Designated as a redevelopment zone at the city, state, and federal levels, Boyle Heights was eligible for funding through

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the City of Los Angeles Redevelopment Zone, California State Enterprise Zone, and Federal Empowerment Zone projects.

THE PROJECT

With no nearby parks available, exercise-minded Boyle Heights residents looking to walk or jog in the neighborhood did laps around a cemetery. The centrally located Evergreen Cemetery provided a convenient location, but the sidewalks' poor condition made the route increasingly more treacherous over time, creating a barrier to health-promoting activity. "I watched it get worse and worse because the roots were pulling up the sidewalk, and they were getting cracked and more and more unsafe," says resident Diana Terrango, who had been walking around the cemetery for 20 years. "Then I went out to Pasadena and saw that they had a jogging path going through their neighborhood and thought it was a wonderful idea." Terrango

shared her idea with James Rojas, co-founder of the Latino Urban Forum, and he got the ball rolling.

The fact that Boyle Heights community members had been politically active in the past helped get the idea off the ground quickly. Terrango, Rojas and several leaders approached Los Angeles City Councilmember Nick Pacheco, who agreed to support the



**BEFORE: CRACKED SIDEWALKS MADE WALKING AND RUNNING A TREACHEROUS EXPERIENCE.
AFTER: A RUBBERIZED PATH SMOOTHES THE WAY FOR JOGGERS AND STROLLING FAMILIES.**

plan if the community did. The newly formed EJPC presented their plan at community meetings and neighbors loved the idea. Community advocate George Magallanes credits Rojas' experience with organizing for the plan's quick success: "James was the key to making it happen. He talked about his research and experience with open spaces and how to make them useful to the community."

With community support behind them, the EJPC began to formalize their plan. They documented the conditions of the sidewalk:

- holes that measured "half a foot deep or more,"
- "root systems that have caused the sidewalk to buckle,"
- "a ½ foot gully" caused by weeds and erosion,
- trash strewn along adjacent dirt paths, and
- "few pedestrian crosswalks" or traffic stops on perimeter streets to protect pedestrians using the space.

Rather than replace the sidewalks with new cement, the group decided to pursue construction of a rubberized path. As manager for sustainability programs at the Department of Public Works, Lupe Vela was in charge of keeping the Bureau of Street Services on track to keep the project moving forward. "I was pushing to have recycled, rubberized asphalt that was high quality and would stand the test of time," said Vela. "Because the area would be functioning like a track, but was not protected, the material had to be sturdy enough to withstand people walking on it with high

heels. We wanted to make sure everyone could walk on it safely."

The next time the EJPC met with Pacheco they brought a clear statement about the problems along with proposed solutions. "James has a way of coming up with ideas and giving people the power to turn them into reality," says Magallanes. "He never comes to a politician and says, 'You're not doing a good job'. It's easy to say you're not doing enough, but coming up with an idea that is good for the community is harder."

Encouraged by community support for the project, Councilmember Pacheco secured \$800,000 from the County Department of Parks and Recreation to build a continuous, rubberized jogging path that would be safe and comfortable for pedestrians and joggers. This path became the first public sidewalk in the country to be designated a recreational public space.

THE PEOPLE

Diverse Partners Collaborate to Build Healthy Environments

Alliances between residents, community activists, and government agencies allowed for the swift, definitive action that brought the jogging path from idea to reality in a mere six months. Rojas teamed with EJPC members including Terrango, Nadine Diaz and Ullyses Sanchez, to collect data and conduct meetings with Councilmember Pacheco, who helped raise the necessary funds from Department of Parks and Recreation

to complete the project. Vela helped keep the project on track. The Metropolitan Transit Authority, the City Council, and residents provided in-kind resources and money to clean and maintain the path.

THE RESULTS

Healthy Change in Local Environments

The EJPC's collaborative efforts demonstrate that even where open space is limited existing sidewalks can provide space for recreational physical activity. Since the path was built, daily use has increased from about 200 to more than 1,000 people who use the path for jogging, walking, and socializing, says Rojas. He emphasizes the importance of building an exercise and social resource within the community. "It gives the residents a stronger sense of identity and a real sense of pride—now everyone points it out," he says.

Magallanes agrees: "The EJPC has changed the face of Evergreen. Small things like the jogging path make a huge difference in how community residents see themselves and the community. The crime rate—I won't say it's disappeared, but I think it has really gone down because people have a lot more ownership. I see senior citizens with walkers and a lot of families walking. It might be a dad jogging and a mom pushing a stroller or a mom jogging and dad riding on a bike



WIDE STREETS AND HEAVY TRAFFIC FLOW SURROUNDING THE EVERGREEN JOGGING PATH CAN MAKE CROSSING A DAUNTING TASK FOR PEDESTRIANS.

alongside with a baby basket in the back. I've had people tell me that their doctors have told them to walk on this jogging path because it is a good place to exercise and the soft rubber is easy on their knees and backs."

The health benefits of regular physical activity are clear, and research shows that easy access to a safe place to exercise promotes fitness. Both access to walking/jogging paths and perceived safety of the paths are positively associated with physical activity behaviors.¹ In particular, proximity to places for physical activity within the neighborhoods promotes activity.² Studies using subjective (self-report) and objective (Geographic Information Systems) measures of proximity both indicate that nearness to walking paths appears to have a significant impact on physical activity for adults.

As Dr. Richard Jackson, former director of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health states, "It's dishonest to tell people to walk, jog, or bicycle when there is not a safe or welcoming place to pursue these 'life-saving' activities."³ Instead of being defeated by the limited open green space in their community, Boyle Heights residents marshalled community resources to improve health by improving access to, and availability of, safer walking routes.

WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCE

Reflecting on the project's success, Rojas appreciates the significance of the first steps involved in community transformation. "Start with observation," advises Rojas. "How is the community operating? What are its shortfalls? What are the needs? And then use creativity to envision solutions." Next comes the action phase, says Rojas. "We had to conduct a lot of meetings, get the 'man' power, collect data, do research and get a handle on where the money was." The assessing, envisioning and mobilizing that occurred at the project's initial phases made a substantial difference in the final result.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Evergreen Jogging Path has become a catalyst for further community change, spurring new efforts specifically geared toward seniors. Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors, a project of the California Center for Physical Activity, is funding the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services' Injury and Violence Prevention Program (IVPP) to explore safety for Boyle Heights seniors, conduct walkability audits to identify potential danger zones for pedestrians on and near the path and to develop solutions. The program has paid particular attention to Evergreen Cemetery as a pedestrian magnet with community buy-in and support. Today, community members hope to create safe routes to and from the jogging path. Based on walkability audits and injury/collision data provided by the county, Safe and Healthy Communities Consulting (SHCC) is helping to identify current barriers to walking and proposing potential design solutions. By documenting findings and providing recommendations on pedestrian hot spots, SHCC will provide research that the community can use to apply for future funding to implement solutions.

Now that the jogging path is in place and in regular use, EJPC organizers say the challenge is keeping it clean. Once every two months, community members come together for a regularly-scheduled clean-up day. Though funding from the City Council helps and the Metropolitan Transit Authority provides money, time, and resources (including personnel, trash bags and brooms), some EJPC members think the city should take more responsibility for keeping the path clean. "I often think that when we first had meetings, we should have gotten something in writing to keep it clean," says Terrango. In the future, some organizers hope the path will develop to include public art installations and more native plants along the loop.

By pulling together the various skills, experiences and resources of Boyle Heights residents, community activists, and government

Because the area would be functioning like a track, but was not protected, the material had to be sturdy enough to withstand people walking on it with high heels. It had to be safe and functional.

agencies, the EJPC took advantage of what limited open space was available in the neighborhood to create a fitness-promoting resource for the whole community.

PROGRAM CONTACT

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Humpel N, Owen N, Leslie E. Environmental Factors Associated with Adults' Participation in Physical Activity. *Am J Prev Med.* 2002; 22(3):188-196.
- 2 Recommendations to Increase Physical Activity in Communities. Task Force on Community Preventive Services, *Am J Prev Med.* 2002;22(4S)67-73
- 3 Jackson RJ, Kochtitzky C. Creating a Healthy Environment: The impact of the built environment on public health. Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse Monograph Series. Accessed 12/12/03: www.sprawlwatch.org

This is one in a series of 11 profiles that reveal how improvements to the built environment can positively influence the health of community residents. The examples illustrate how changes to the built environment can be particularly meaningful in communities that have historically lacked important features such as pedestrian infrastructure, services and institutions, or public art. Taken more broadly, the profiles demonstrate how improvements to the built environment have the potential to reduce health disparities.

The profiles were written and produced by Prevention Institute. Funding and guidance were provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health. It is our hope that these profiles will stimulate and inspire partnerships between community residents and practitioners from multiple fields and sectors to design solutions and take action to improve the built environment for the health and well-being of all.