

DOES THE GREAT STREETS INITIATIVE
IN LOS ANGELES SERVE THE GOALS OF
URBAN PLANNING FROM THE
IMPLEMENTATION SIDE?

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ABSTRACT

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti recently announced a Great Streets Initiative designed to revitalize neighborhood streets and improve quality of life in the city of Los Angeles. The purpose of Great Streets is to recreate the street as a place where people want to go and spend time, rather than just a space to move through. Fifteen streets have been targeted by the mayor's office for revitalization in locations that have begun to show the early signs of complete street design, but the actual planning and street design process is intended to be bottom-up, with heavy community engagement. Although the goals outlined by the Great Streets Initiative promise positive effects, are local residents even interested in the concept of Great Streets? This study specifically focuses on two of the fifteen Los Angeles streets: Reseda Boulevard and Gaffey Street. Through an examination of case studies for similar projects in select cities throughout the United States, systematic observation of the local area as it currently exists and interviews with local area merchants, this study explores whether or not the Great Streets Initiative is serving the goals of urban planning from the implementation side, in terms of meeting the needs of the community.

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Introduction

Streets are significant to the quality of life in every community and should be available for everyone in the community to use. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that our streets are designed only in consideration of the automobile. In other words, the primary purpose of street design has been to maximize motor vehicle traffic speeds at the expense of all other road users. One way to combat this auto-oriented design is to implement complete streets.

Building upon the complete streets work initiated by his predecessor Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, current Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti recently announced his new Great Streets Initiative in June 2014. The Great Streets Initiative intends to revitalize neighborhood streets and improve the quality of life in the city of Los Angeles by recreating streets as places that people actually want to go and spend time, rather than just a space for cars to speed through.

The purpose of this section is to clarify the difference between a “complete street” and a “great street”. According to the National Complete Streets Coalition, a complete street is a street that is “designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities”.¹ In other words, rather than having streets designed with only the automobile in mind, complete streets policies call for



Fig. 1: Smart Growth America, *Complete Street*. 2012.

¹ National Complete Streets Coalition, “What Are Complete Streets?,” *Smart Growth America*, 2015, <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/complete-streets-fundamentals/complete-streets-faq>.

transportation planners and engineers to take into consideration the needs of other modes of transportation. Essentially complete streets are designed so that taking transit, bicycling, and walking can become more convenient.

By comparison, while a “great street” is also concerned with multimodalism, the defining characteristic of a great street is how the street encourages social activity and contributes to creating a sense of space and community. In other words, in addition to being “complete” from a transportation



Fig. 2: Planning Tool Exchange, *San Francisco Great Streets Project*. 2015.

standpoint, great streets place heavy emphasis on the visual aspect and environment surrounding the corridor. According to the American Planning Association, in designating a great street, in addition to examining the physical elements in street form and composition (such as landscaping and street furniture) it is necessary to also consider the character or personality of the street, analyzing how the street reflects the local culture or history, what features make the street memorable, how the street creates a visual experience, and how the vitality of the street benefits from community involvement and participation.²

The first 15 streets that have been targeted by the mayor’s office for a Great Streets makeover (one location each for the city’s 15 council districts) are all locations that are showing the early signs of change, whether that be in the form of an expected state grant, or a business

² American Planning Association, “Characteristics and Guidelines of Great Streets,” *APA Great Places in America: Streets*, n.d., <https://www.planning.org/greatplaces/streets/characteristics.htm>.

improvement district.³ Although this first phase of the Great Streets Initiative will not see full completion for another three to five years, Los Angeles residents will not have to wait that long to witness progress and experience a difference in the street environment. As of June 2014, the city has planned several “pop-up” events at the selected Great Streets locations, where temporary street installations such as parklets and pedestrian plazas will be implemented for the length of a full year.⁴ These pop-up events will introduce local citizens to the types of pedestrian infrastructure that can be expected from the Great Streets Initiative, and acclimate motorists to the traffic-calming factor.

The purpose of this research is to explore whether or not the Great Streets initiatives serve the goals of urban planning from the implementation side, in terms of meeting the needs of the affected community. What does successful community engagement look at? Does the Great Streets Initiative demonstrate a bottom-up planning process that reflects bottom-up priorities? Although the first 15 streets that have been targeted for Great Streets treatment were decided upon by the mayor's office, the actual planning and street design process is intended to be bottom-up, with heavy community engagement. This type of planning would generate a streetscape where local residents actually enjoy spending time, because they were actively involved in its creation. From a planning perspective, retrofitting the street to meet Great Streets goals through this bottom-up planning approach would also help to foster a sense of place within the community, and support the future sustainability of the community.⁵

³ Damien Newton, “New Chamber of Commerce Excited About Great Streets on Venice Blvd.,” *Streetsblog LA*, 2014, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2014/10/30/new-chamber-of-commerce-excited-about-great-streets-on-venice-blvd/>.

⁴ Bianca Barragan, “How LA Is Making It Simple to Create New Parklets and Plazas,” *Curbed Los Angeles*, 2014, http://la.curbed.com/archives/2014/03/how_la_is_making_it_simple_to_create_new_parklets_and_plazas_1.php.

⁵ Ashley Marie Williams, “Rapid Urban Revitalization: Flexible Design Strategies for Promoting Economic Growth, Social Engagement, and Future Sustainability in Urban Spaces” (Ball State University, 2013).

The variables that will be evaluated in this research are (1) how the planners within/involved with the Great Streets project team feel about their attempts to engage the community (i.e. do they think that they were successful in providing enough public information, and in encouraging input from a diverse population?), (2) how well the local community feels that they were informed about the Great Streets Initiative by way of the media and telecommunication or access to community meetings, and (3) whether or not the local community feels that their input is actually being valued and truly considered.

I hypothesize that when this initial phase of the Great Streets Initiative is in place, local residents will be satisfied with their upgraded, more livable streets because they themselves played a large role in dictating the design elements that would be incorporated into the Great Streets. In other words, I hypothesize that the Great Streets Initiative will be a demonstration and validation of successful community-based, bottom-up planning.

Literature Review

The nationwide complete streets movement first began in the early 2000's as a response to the automobile-oriented suburban development that occurred after World War II. As a result of this auto-oriented development, many American community streets lack pedestrian-friendly amenities such as sidewalks, safe street crossings, bike lanes, and transit facilities. The complete streets movement aims to redesign these streets to provide safe access to all street users, encouraging multimodal transportation. Through designs that support alternative travel choices, complete streets projects allow a community to gain more output from the existing road space by reducing the need to rely on an automobile, thus improving overall efficiency and capacity by moving more people in the same amount of space.

With regards to complete streets projects, the policies set out by many city agencies are geared towards trying to achieve the health, safety, walkability, and livability goals to best serve residents of the community.⁶ However, in the project reports that these agencies publish and release to the public, there is always mention of the economic benefits that can be generated from complete streets implementation.⁷ Investing in complete streets policies leads to a revitalization of the local economy by improving the city's livability and productivity. Local economic growth can be attributed to various factors, but primarily the success seems to be a result of increased connectivity and accessibility.⁸ The theory is that accessibility factors such as increased non-motorized access, transit access, connectivity of the street network, and decreased distances between activities are the impacts of complete streets upon accessibility.⁹ Complete streets can create new jobs (or redistribute jobs), and also reduce annual household spending on transportation since the need for an automobile is lessened.¹⁰ By making the street a more attractive space for all users, a pedestrian lifestyle is encouraged and commercial activity is able to flourish, thus boosting the local economy and allowing for increases in sales tax revenue.¹¹

Past complete streets projects have relied heavily on claims of potential economic benefits to promote the projects.¹² Although economic revitalization is definitely significant,

⁶ Beacon Economics, *2013 Los Angeles City Council Districts Economic Report*, 2013, http://www.lachamber.com/clientuploads/Access_LA/2013LACityCouncilDistrictsEconomicReport.pdf; New York City Department of Transportation, *The Economic Benefits of Sustainable Streets*, 2013, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/dot-economic-benefits-of-sustainable-streets.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Center for Clean Air Policy, *Growing Wealthier: Smart Growth, Climate Change and Prosperity*, 2011.

⁹ Todd Litman, *Evaluating Complete Streets: The Value of Designing Roads For Diverse Modes, Users and Activities*, 2014, <http://www.vtpi.org/compstr.pdf>.

¹⁰ Pete Fritz, "Complete Streets: Economic Development & Placemaking," July 2011.

¹¹ Los Angeles Department of City Planning, *Draft Mobility Plan 2035*, 2014, http://planning.lacity.org/Cwd/GnlPln/MobiltyElement/Text/MobilityPlan_2035.pdf; Zaki Mustafa and Michelle Birdsall, "The Great Streets Movement," *Institute of Transportation Engineers Journal*, 2014, 27–32. 2014.

¹² Heidi Garrett-Peltier, *Estimating the Employment Impacts of Pedestrian, Bicycle, and Road Infrastructure*, 2010; National Complete Streets Coalition, "Economic Development," *Smart Growth America*, 2014, <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/complete-streets-fundamentals/factsheets/economic-revitalization>; Trust for America's Health, *Healthier Americans for a Healthier Economy*, 2011.

sadly the focus on the economic aspect has the effect of masking the broader safety and mobility goals of a complete street project, because the initial concern of the general public becomes the economic impact. The most basic purpose of a complete street is to provide safe access to all street users and encourage multimodal transportation. Economic revitalization and stimulation should be a secondary goal of a complete street project. By emphasizing potential economic benefits, the city agencies releasing these project reports only further diminish the true health and safety goals of complete streets, all for the purposes of trying to convince the community into supporting such a project.

The issue with predominately stressing the goals of economic revitalization over safety goals is that the community then gauges whether or not they will support a complete street project based upon the severity of the impact that the project may have upon the economy, rather than the greater safety and mobility benefits that a complete street can bring to the community at large. In other words, unfortunately thus far the most popular or effective method of promoting and bringing public awareness to projects such as the Los Angeles Great Streets Initiative is by citing and focusing on economic potential rather than the intended project goals of making the city more livable and walkable.

The existing literature demonstrates the way that many city agencies tend to market complete streets projects to the general public. While the existing literature does reveal that there has been a great effort by city officials, planners, and neighborhood councils alike in ensuring that community awareness and participation is involved in developing complete streets projects¹³, little research has examined whether or not complete streets projects such as the Great

¹³ Joe Piasecki and Gary Walker, "One Block at a Time," *Argonaut Online*, 2014, <http://argonautnews.com/one-block-at-a-time/>.

Streets Initiative are actually serving planning goals from the implementation side, in terms of meeting the needs of the community: do local residents even want a complete street, are there other ways that the money could be better spent, and do the priorities of the affected neighborhood correspond with Mayor Garcetti's complete streets priorities?

Research Design & Methods

To answer these questions among others, I collected data by (1) analyzing reports and case studies on similar projects in cities throughout the United States, (2) observing the local area (targeted sections of Reseda Boulevard and Gaffey Street) as it currently exists, and (3) conducting interviews (both individually and within a group setting) with local area merchants and residents.

I also reached out to contracted, third party members of the Great Streets team (such as the Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI) on Gaffey Street and LA-Más on Reseda Boulevard) to interview how these consulting planners involved with the Great Streets project team feel about their attempts to engage the community. Of the 15 Great Streets initially targeted by the mayor's office, I chose to study Reseda Boulevard and Gaffey Street because as of the writing of this thesis, these two particular streets are the furthest along on their Great Streets makeover.

I specifically planned to interview small business owners because this group has much to gain from greater pedestrian and bicycle traffic.¹⁴ For the purposes of this research I define small business owners as people who operate a privately-owned business with a modest number of employees. I also interviewed local residents because they are the population most impacted by

¹⁴ Transportation Alternatives, *Transportation Alternatives 2012-2013 Annual Report* (New York City, 2013).

any future street changes. Interview participants were recruited in person during several site visits, by approaching local residents or merchants in their stores and businesses along Reseda Boulevard and Gaffey Street in Los Angeles, California. Interview participants were all between the ages of 18-65, and their participation was completely voluntary. Consent was obtained verbally. The primary study instrument that I used was an interview outline. The interview outline contained questions intended to gauge local public opinions on the Great Streets project. As a precautionary measure in case the people who I interviewed were unfamiliar with the Great Streets program or complete streets concepts in general, I was prepared to verbally explain the fundamentals of complete streets, and I also carried visual materials such as maps and images of the boundaries of the targeted Great Streets projects as well as documentation on the intended effects of the Great Streets Initiative.

The interviews were informal yet structured, with an initial set of predetermined, open-ended questions. I approached the interview portion of my research with the intention of encouraging a dialogue. The interview questions that were asked include the following:

- Do you (local residents or business owners) even want a Great Street?
- Do you support the concept of complete streets?
- Were you ever informed on what the Great Streets Initiative is, or what it aims to achieve?
- Have you attended any of the meetings that have involved the planning of the Great Streets project?
- Were these meetings accessible in terms of notification, time, and location?
- What do you anticipate will happen to local businesses when the Great Streets project on your street is complete?
- What do you think of the timing of the Great Streets Initiative?
- What other ways do you think that the money set aside for the Great Streets Initiative could be better spent?

- What is your opinion on the relationship between community need and location in terms of the selected 15 Great Streets? Should the Mayor's office have selected a different street in your community?
- What do you think of the impacts (positive or negative) that a Great Street might bring to your street compared to any changes that are already occurring?

I was also fortunate enough to be able to attend an open community meeting for Gaffey Street in San Pedro. This community meeting was scheduled by the planners from LANI and the contracted design consulting team (RRM Design Group), and the main agenda item was a presentation about a potential lane reduction on Gaffey Street. I did not follow my interview outline at this particular event; my main objective for attending this meeting was just to listen to the feedback from community members based on the topics presented by the involved planners and design consultants. During this community workshop I took notes on the concerns voiced by local residents, who queued up to share their opinions about the planning process and proposed Gaffey Street conceptual plan. A limitation of this research is that I was unable to attend a similar community meeting for Reseda Boulevard in Northridge, due to a scheduling issue.

Findings

To reiterate, the focus of my thesis is not so much on the Great Streets project itself, but rather on the planning process and participatory efforts that are presently occurring on the selected Los Angeles Great Streets. In other words, I am examining how well the broader goals of bottom-up planning correspond to the actual public participation and community engagement that is currently being done with the Great Streets projects on Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard.

One of the primary questions I mentioned earlier in this paper was: what does successful community engagement look at, or what should community engagement look like? To begin my Findings section, I start by investigating the ways in which the participatory process was defined, conducted, or received in precedent complete streets-type projects.

Defining Community Engagement

The exact definition of community participation or public engagement can vary from project to project, and our expectations of the appropriate levels of civic participation can change over time. For the purposes of analyzing the participatory efforts regarding the Great Streets project later on in this paper, in this particular section I will be discussing what community engagement and bottom-up planning means, encompasses, or tends to look like through reports and case studies on similar projects in cities throughout the United States.

In terms of categorizing the variations of community participation, Henry Sanoff (referencing Deshler and Sock) identifies two levels of participation: pseudoparticipation and genuine participation.¹⁵

Pseudoparticipation involves information, manipulation, and placation (essentially the manipulation of citizens by professionals). According to Sanoff, pseudoparticipation is actually nonparticipatory, in the sense that the level of participation just consists of the general public being in attendance to listen to what is being, or has already been planned for them.¹⁵ On the other hand, genuine participation involves cooperation, partnership, and the delegation of power.¹⁵ Genuine participation occurs when community members are empowered and in control

¹⁵ Henry Sanoff, *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning* (Wiley, 1999); D. Deshler and D. Sock, "Community Development Participation: A Concept Review of the International Literature. Paper Presented at the International League for Social Commitment in Adult Education. Sweden. ," 1985.

of project planning and the decision-making process. Whereas pseudoparticipation exhibits a weak level of participation lacking a true dialogue between the community and the project staff, genuine participation demonstrates a strong level of participation in which community members and project staff collectively play a role in project development, and constantly maintain a sufficient amount of communication and cooperation.¹⁶ I will use this definition or categorization of the levels of participation to analyze whether or not the Great Streets Initiative demonstrates a bottom-up planning process that actually reflects bottom-up priorities.

Case Studies of Community Participation in Similar Projects

To gauge how well the community participation efforts for the Los Angeles Great Streets Initiative stack up to other similar projects in terms of serving the goals of urban planning from the implementation side and meeting the needs or concerns of the community, I provide several case studies of the community participation efforts taken in comparable complete streets/street design projects throughout the United States.

New Haven, Connecticut

The city of New Haven recently released a “Complete Streets Design Manual” for the purpose of providing a type of handbook containing technical guidance on the rebuilding and rehabilitation of city streets (with the intent of creating complete streets), as well as for equipping the citizens of New Haven with the information and tools necessary to “engage in constructive conversations about solving local traffic problems with city staff”.¹⁷

¹⁶ Iqtidar Ali Shah and Neeta Baporikar, “Participatory Approach to Development in Pakistan,” *Journal of Economic and Social Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 111–41.

¹⁷ City of New Haven, “City of New Haven Complete Streets Design Manual,” 2010.

The street design process detailed in the manual intends to prescribe a method for approaching community participation in the street redesign processes in New Haven. Historically the city took a traditional approach to community engagement and worked primarily with community groups to address traffic safety problems. Although this technically did include community members in the process, a community group is not comprehensive of, and does not necessarily reflect, every member of the community. However, according to the city of New Haven, public interest in the details of street redesign processes and traffic safety concerns have reached “historic levels”¹⁷, thus prompting the city to reexamine the way it has traditionally approached the process of community engagement.

As detailed in the Complete Streets Design Manual, the city of New Haven has upgraded its approach and developed a new protocol for constructive engagement between community members and city staff which allows members of the public to initiate projects either by community request (by submitting a project request form) or through the ongoing maintenance being done by the City.¹⁷ Either way, the processes are subject to an open design process consistent with the goals outlined in the design manual, and the community members are involved along every step of the way, from developing consensus on a design plan to working with the city to identify funding sources and maintenance options.

Arlington, Virginia

The city of Arlington recently developed a plan to redesign its Clarendon Circle intersection (consisting of three separate streets) to improve pedestrian, bicycle, and motorist safety and access. The city began by conducting a multimodal study of the Clarendon Circle intersection, identifying existing street and traffic issues, and proposing alternatives for potential

improvements that could be made.¹⁸ After preparing this information, the Arlington Department of Environmental Services, Division of Transportation staff set out to make a series of public outreach efforts to share the information that they had collected and to acquire feedback on the proposed street design improvements that they had developed. Their approach to public outreach was multipronged and consisted of the following methods¹⁹:

Business and Property Owners

Arlington staff met with the representatives of the various businesses located along the affected streets, regardless of the size of the business (small privately-owned businesses as well as nationwide chains were included), to discuss the proposed design alternatives and listen to concerns regarding potential impacts upon business.

Civic Associations

Arlington staff made presentations at the regularly scheduled meetings of each of the five affected civic associations or neighborhood groups.

Commissions and Clarendon Alliance

Arlington staff also made presentations at the meetings of groups such as the Transportation Commission and the Clarendon Alliance, which is essentially the neighborhood's partnership organization functioning similarly to a Business Improvement District. This approach was taken to review the proposed plans, as well as to ensure that the plans did not impact any adjacent historically significant landmarks.

Local Media

Arlington staff included local media as part of its public outreach efforts by having online news outlets and blogs cover the city's findings and proposed street designs.

Web Page and Online Survey

The staff prepared a project webpage on the City of Arlington website which included: details

¹⁸ Toole Design Group and Arlington County Department of Environmental Services, Division of Transportation, *Clarendon Circle Transportation Study: A Multimodal Study of Clarendon Circle and Surrounding Intersections*, 2012.

¹⁹ Arlington County DES, *Clarendon Circle Improvements Project: Summary of Public Outreach*, 2012.

about the project and links to the presentation that the staff had prepared for the aforementioned meetings, the full multimodal study, and an online survey (which ultimately received 224 responses, predominately from residents of the surrounding area although several respondents were from other neighborhoods).

The City of Arlington's approach to public outreach and community engagement is noteworthy because of how comprehensive it attempted to be- the information was presented live in-person, via print media, and also on various different online media outlets. The majority of the public outreach and garnering of community feedback was completed in typical real time, face-to-face interactions, which one could argue is the most constructive or appropriate method of community engagement because city staff and the general public are able to engage in a dialogue, and questions and concerns can be addressed practically instantly. However, only engaging those who either attend community meetings or are part of a neighborhood group or alliance is often not fully representative of the entire neighborhood in terms of noting all interests and viewpoints²⁰. Arlington's attempt to resolve this issue was to include online options for those who were either completely unaware of the project, or were unable to attend community workshops due to reasons such as time inconvenience or meeting inaccessibility. And by including an online survey option, the city not only helps make citizens aware of the project and proposed plans, but is also able to receive a greater range of comments thus making it easier to gauge general public support and opinion.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration/Federal Transit Administration, *Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making Chapter 4: Using Special Techniques to Enhance Participation*, 2002.

Brooklyn, New York

In 2010, the New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) removed one travel lane on Prospect Park West in Brooklyn (thus reducing the number of one-way lanes on the street from 3 to 2) in order to make way for a new two-way bicycle lane. The street redesign plans included the implementation of a parking-protected bike lane, changes in traffic signal timing, and the installment of warning signs to alert bicyclists to yield to pedestrians. The NYC DOT was prompted to take this action in response to community concerns raised by Community Board 6 about speeding vehicles and the lack of safe access for pedestrians and bicyclists along the street.²¹ Despite being initiated by members of the community, this project, dubbed the Prospect Park West Bicycle Path project, was met with a lot of community opposition and controversy, even getting hit with a lawsuit (which was eventually dismissed).



Fig. 3: NYC DOT, *Prospect Park West Bike Lane*. 2011.

²¹ Seth Ullman, “Prospect Park West: Overcoming Controversy to Improve Safety and Mobility in Brooklyn,” *Project for Public Spaces*, n.d., <http://www.pps.org/reference/prospect-park-west-overcoming-controversy-to-create-safety-and-mobility-benefits-in-brooklyn/>.

The main narrative of the lawsuit was a complaint from the plaintiffs (a group of residents from the group “Neighbors for Better Bike Lanes”) which argued that the public planning process regarding the Prospect Park West project prior to the NYC DOT’s



Fig. 4: New York Times, *Dueling Protests over a Brooklyn Bike Lane*. 2010.

design proposal had been inadequate. According to the plaintiffs’ complaint, there had not been any community workshops to identify problems with the existing street, and there were no public demands for increased safety for pedestrians and bicyclists.²² The City responded by arguing that the project was undertaken in response to community requests, the redesign plans were revised multiple times based on input gathered from the community, and that implementation only occurred after the completion of a substantial amount of street analysis.²³

According to the Prospect Park West Community Outreach Timeline produced by the NYC DOT, the City conducted a thorough public planning process encouraging public outreach and participation by hosting community workshops and public hearings in partnership with Community Board 6. Attendance at these community workshops were in the hundreds.²³ Ultimately the NYC DOT was able to defeat the lawsuit and successfully defend its community outreach efforts.

²² Ben Fried, “Politically Connected PPW Bike Lane Foes Are Fighting Their Own Neighbors,” *Streetsblog NYC*, 2011, <http://www.streetsblog.org/2011/03/10/politically-connected-ppw-bike-lane-foes-are-fighting-their-own-neighbors/>.

²³ New York City Department of Transportation, “Prospect Park West Bicycle Path and Traffic Calming,” *New York City DOT*, 2015, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/bicyclists/prospectparkwest.shtml>.

After the Prospect Park West Bike Path was installed, Councilmembers Brad Lander and Stephen Levin collaborated with Community Board 6 to conduct a follow-up community survey to gauge public opinion and gather further community input. A 13-question survey containing both multiple-choice and open-ended questions was distributed online and in-person, and was covered in TV, print, and online media.²⁴ In total, 3,150 Brooklyn residents responded to the survey, with a majority demonstrating broad support for the project, feeling that the Prospect Park West Bike Path project had met its goals of reducing automobile speeding and creating a safer street space for walking and bicycling.²⁴

Greenwich and Stamford, Connecticut

In 2011, the South Western Regional Planning Agency (SWRPA) was working on a study to develop a plan for improving pedestrian friendliness, minimizing congestion, and encouraging more multimodal transportation along the US Route 1 corridor in Greenwich and Stamford, Connecticut. A significant portion of the study and development process was focused on active public involvement. The four-phase study approach taken by the SWRPA on this project consisted of two phases solely dedicated to the public involvement process- a Visioning Workshop and a Design Workshop.²⁵

The Visioning Workshop was the second step in the study process (occurring after the analysis of existing conditions). The Visioning Workshop was a three-day event focused on a variety of stakeholder interviews and community workshops, intended to provide the opportunity for the community to help guide the direction of the plan. The stakeholder interviews were pre-

²⁴ Office of NYC Councilmember Brad Lander, "Community Survey Results on Prospect Park West Reconfiguration," *New York City Councilmember Brad Lander*, 2010, <http://bradlander.com/ppwsurvey>.

²⁵ South Western Regional Planning Agency, *US Route 1 Greenwich/Stamford Operational Improvements Study Volume 2: Public Involvement*, 2011.

scheduled one-on-one interviews conducted by the project team.²⁵ Stakeholders who were interviewed included representatives from area agencies, local property owners, businesses, neighborhood groups, and developers. Two community workshops were conducted during this Visioning phase for the purpose of gathering ideas and concerns from a broader range of community members from both Greenwich and Stamford. At these community workshops, the project team gave educational presentations explaining issues with the corridor, the principles of complete streets, and overall goals of the study. After the presentations, the community members present at the workshops were asked to participate in a “visioning exercise” so that community values could be identified, along with more specific issues and design opportunities.²⁵



Fig. 5: SWRPA, *Route 1 Greenwich-Stamford Study: Visioning Workshop Report*. 2010.

Following the Visioning Workshop phase was the Design Workshop phase of public involvement. The purpose of the Design Workshop phase was to gather feedback and public recommendations regarding the initial design concepts developed by the project team based on the “visions” identified during the Visioning phase. The Design Workshop phase had a very similar format to the Visioning phase, with a three-day event containing workshops and individual meetings with meetings participants. Using the comments and public input gathered

during the design workshops, the project team was able to clearly identify and create a list of concerns that would eventually serve as a checklist of both short- and long-term goals to be considered in the development of a final project.

In terms of SWRPA's efforts to increase public awareness about these workshop events, the project team distributed public notices containing information on meeting times, locations, and opportunities for participation, as well as newsletters including project background and timelines, and workshop updates and recaps.²⁵ Also detailed on both the public notices and the newsletters was contact information for the project team and web links to additional resources regarding the study. However, there was no specific information available in the final report regarding how these public notices and newsletters were distributed (in terms of online or in-person, or what types of media coverage were involved).

I will use the public outreach and community engagement efforts taken in these case studies to determine how well the community participation efforts for the Los Angeles Great Streets Initiative stack up in terms of serving the goals of urban planning from the implementation side and meeting the needs or concerns of the community.

Local Area Observations

To provide some locational context, provided below is a basic map I have created depicting the specific locations of both Reseda Boulevard and Gaffey Street in relation to the Los Angeles city boundary and other targeted Great Streets. To gain a better sense of the populations that reside in Northridge and San Pedro (the neighborhoods in which Reseda Boulevard and Gaffey Street exist) I also collected census data from the 2008 U.S. Census, Los Angeles Times, the Los Angeles Department of City Planning, and the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG). From there, I included my own personal observations noted from site visits to the individual streets and neighborhoods.

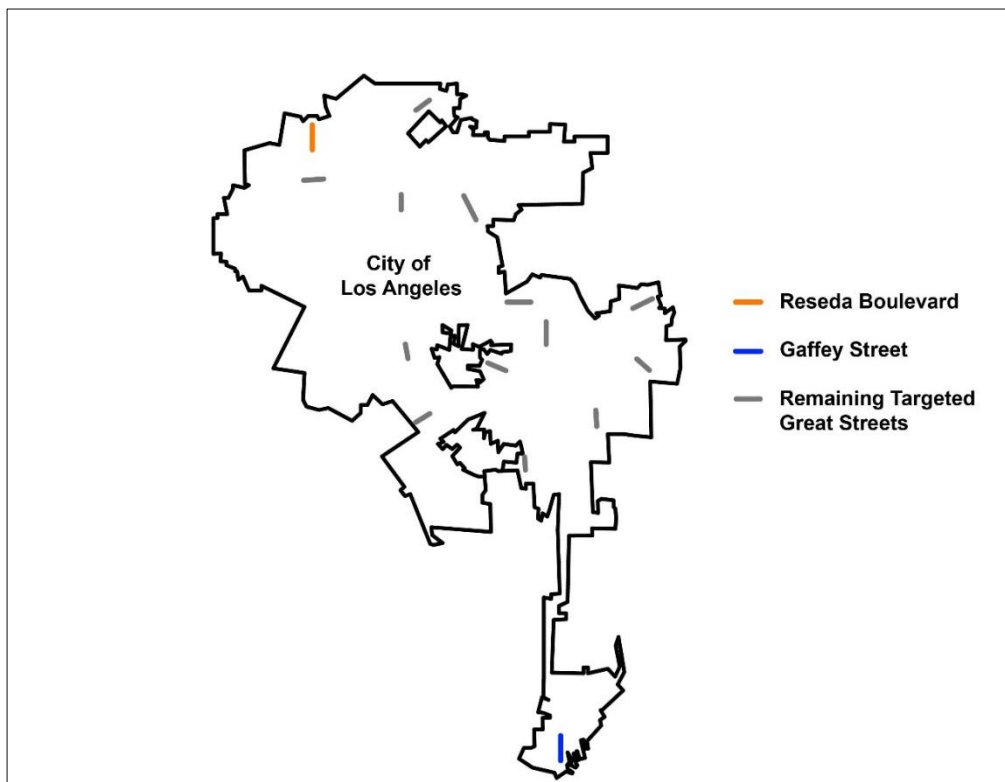


Fig. 6: Locations of Reseda Blvd. and Gaffey St. in relation to Los Angeles city boundaries and the 13 other targeted Great Streets

| Measures | Reseda Blvd. (Northridge) | Gaffey St. (San Pedro) |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Population (2008) | 61,993 | 86,012 |
| Race/Ethnicity (%): White | 49.5% | 44.2% |
| Race/Ethnicity (%): Hispanic/Latino | 26.1% | 40.8% |
| Race/Ethnicity (%): African American | 5.4% | 6.1% |
| Race/Ethnicity (%): Asian | 14.5% | 4.8% |
| Median HHI (2008) | \$67,906 | \$57,508 |
| Median Age | 32 | 34 |

Fig. 7: Neighborhood level census data ²⁶

I visited both Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard several times within the months of December 2014 and January 2015. The exact portions of the two focus streets targeted by the Los Angeles Mayor’s office were Gaffey Street between 15th Street and the 110 Freeway, and Reseda Boulevard between Plummer Street and Parthenia Street. Below is a table containing an assortment of basic observations I made from walking along the designated portions of the two streets during my site visits:

²⁶ 2008 U.S. Census, Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), Los Angeles Department of City Planning, Los Angeles Times

| <u>Gaffey Street</u> | <u>Reseda Blvd</u> |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 110 Freeway empties onto Gaffey Street • Heavy automobile traffic, automobiles travelling at about 50-55mph • No bike lanes • Little to no pedestrians • Visually unappealing (cluttered with billboards) • Most of the businesses along the street were fast food/ drive-thru • Several businesses that local residents may consider undesirable • Lighted pedestrian bridge improves pedestrian safety/visibility at night | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very fast automobile speeds • Roadway is very wide (4 travel lanes) • Few bike lanes • Fairly wide sidewalks, but low walkability due to the very limited amount of crosswalks • Clear attempts of community/street beautification in the form of murals and sidewalk furniture • Businesses along the street were mostly mom-and-pop type stores; very few chain stores • Little to no pedestrians |

Fig. 8: Initial observations about Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard

Northridge is a fairly low-density neighborhood in the city of Los Angeles. Reseda Boulevard is located closely to California State University, Northridge, which is why Mayor Garcetti initially prioritized and viewed Reseda Boulevard as a “potential campus village”.²⁷ As the census table shows, the population of Northridge is rather ethnically diverse, especially compared with the rest of the city. When compared to other neighborhoods in the city of Los Angeles, the median household income in Northridge is high, and the median age is fairly average. Upon a site visit, my initial observation of Reseda Boulevard was that the street itself

²⁷ Doug Stevens and Priya Krishnakumar, “Explore the ‘Great Streets’ of Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/la-interactive-me-great-streets-20140725-htlstory.html>.

was extremely wide, with plenty of space for sidewalks, cars, and parking. However, I also noticed that the area seemed well served by transit. There was a Metrolink station located reasonably close by, as well as several buses pulling up to a consistently crowded bus shelter. According to the Mayor's office, the goal of developing Reseda Boulevard as a Great Street is to continue to improve on the street's accessibility for people who choose alternative transportation options such as walking, biking, or taking transit, as well as to support economic development along the street by providing more sidewalk amenities for the local businesses. Given the median age and substantial student population residing in the area, I predicted that social media and online communication would play a large part in public outreach efforts for Reseda Boulevard.

San Pedro is also a low density neighborhood in the city of Los Angeles. As the census table shows, the neighborhood of San Pedro is fairly ethnically diverse, and when compared with the rest of the city, both the median age and household income are considered average. With its waterfront location, San Pedro contains several tourist sites such as the Port of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Maritime Museum, and other waterfront attractions. As the end of a major freeway, Gaffey Street is the entrance into San Pedro as well as its main arterial street. A common resident complaint about Gaffey Street is how visually unappealing it is, and upon my initial site visit I would have to agree with that sentiment. The entire street is filled with fast food drive-throughs such as McDonald's and Taco Bell, as well as imposing signage from chain stores such as Rite Aid. With all of the tourist spots that San Pedro has to offer, according to the Mayor's office the goal for Gaffey Street as a Great Street is to become more welcoming for both residents and visitors, creating more opportunities for walking, shopping, and dining, thus transforming Gaffey Street from just an entrance into more of a gateway into San Pedro. Given the seemingly car-

centric environment of the community, I predicted that there would be some opposition to the complete street ideals of sharing the street space with other users.

Stakeholder Roles and Responsibilities

The primary stakeholders who played a role in the Great Streets Initiative efforts on Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard thus far include the Mayor's office, the planners/design consultants, and members of the general public.

Mayor's Office

The City of Los Angeles is the main sponsor of the Great Streets Initiative, with the Great Streets team of the Mayor's office responsible for developing an action plan and strategy for implementation. According to Mayor Garcetti, the Great Streets Initiative is part of his "Back to Basics agenda to create a stronger economy and a more livable LA".²⁸ The Mayor's office Great Streets team was tasked with the following items: (1) determining the criteria and strategy for identifying streets to be included in the Great Streets program, (2) creating a starting candidate list of 40 potential streets, (3) developing a strategy for the coordination of city services to the Great Streets, (4) establishing a timeline for project implementation, and (5) identifying sources of funding.²⁹ To officially launch the Initiative, the Mayor's Great Streets team introduced the first 15 streets to be targeted for improvements, with one street chosen for each of the 15 council districts in the city of Los Angeles.

²⁸ City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT), *Great Streets for Los Angeles: Strategic Plan*, 2014, <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs/impl/ca-losangeles-dot-strategicplan2014.pdf>.

²⁹ City of Los Angeles, "Press Release: Mayor Garcetti Issues First Executive Directive to Launch Great Streets Initiative," 2014, http://www.lamayor.org/mayor_garcetti_issues_first_executive_directive_to_launch_great_streets_initiative.

Planners/Consultants

Thus far in the progress of Initiative implementation, the involved planners and design consultants were contracted by the Mayor's office to help develop plans for a series of transformative streetscape improvements on Gaffey Street in San Pedro and Reseda Boulevard in Northridge. The underlying interest of the planners and consultants is to meet and achieve the goals of the Mayor's citywide street beautification initiative. However, the primary role of the planners and consultants is to support and facilitate community involvement by providing special knowledge, resources, training, and other technical assistance to the communities of San Pedro and Northridge. From an educational or experience standpoint they know what kind of streetscape improvements would best aid in achieving the Initiative goals and may already have a design plan in mind, but their duty is to help guide the San Pedro and Northridge communities without forcing their own priorities or opinions onto them. Essentially, the role of the planners and consultants is to introduce improvement possibilities and help the community visualize new solutions for streetscape transformation.

General Public

In this case, the general public includes any residents or local business owners in the neighborhoods of San Pedro and Northridge who would be affected by changes brought about with the Great Streets Initiative. In bottom-up planning, the role of the general public is to become active participants in the project planning process by attending community workshops and providing as much feedback as possible. Basically, the community members should be heavily in control of the planning and decision-making process regarding the formation of a Great Street in their community.

While the Mayor's office and the planners play a greater role in the beginning of the process in terms of shaping the initial project, afterwards the community members and general public are supposed to play the greatest role in the planning and implementation process. In terms of the relationship each of these stakeholders has with each other, (1) the Mayor's office Great Streets team is responsible for determining the initial targeted streets, identifying a funding strategy, and contracting the planners/consultants to assist the community members, then (2) the planners/consultants are responsible for providing their experienced insight and guidance to community members at the meetings and workshops, and (3) the community members and general public are responsible for participating and being engaged in the planning process as the primary decision-makers.

Interview Responses

The following table details the interview responses I was able to obtain. Although the majority of the responses were collected during the interview process in which I used the interview outline I had prepared, several of the responses were also gathered from comments made by community members at the Gaffey Street community meeting I attended, as well as from community feedback left on the social media accounts, specifically Facebook, of the Great Streets Initiative, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI), and LA-Más. Because the interview questions I had prepared were open-ended with the intention of encouraging a dialogue, the responses that I received from the interviewees all vary in terms of the depth of the answer.

The responses in the following table have been organized according to their relevance to one of five factors or themes:

- **Public notification about the Great Streets Initiative/ Public involvement in the planning process**
- **Support; Those who were optimistic about the Great Streets Initiative, or any positive comments about the selected street**
- **Opposition; Those who were pessimistic about the Great Streets Initiative, or any negative comments regarding the selected street**
- **Gentrification concerns**
- **Street Design Elements**

| Factors | Gaffey Street Participant Responses | Reseda Blvd Participant Responses |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Public notification about the Great Streets Initiative/ Public involvement in the planning process</p> | <p>-The Great Streets Initiative was never really explained. Cannot tell you exactly what comprises a Great Street, or what a Great Street is.</p> <p>-Gaffey Street was selected as a Great Street without resident consultation.</p> <p>-At the community meeting, hundreds of angry residents showed up because they had not heard about the proposed plans (even though this was the third meeting). There was only such a great turnout on this particular night because of concerns about a proposed lane reduction.</p> <p>-The public has no idea who is involved in the steering committee.</p> <p>-Residents want to be more involved in the decision making.</p> <p>-People who are currently involved in the process argue that the other residents only get involved when they are angry about something. The whole process would have been more effective if they had just been involved from the get-go.</p> <p>-More people/residents have to get involved so that Gaffey Street does not lose this opportunity to improve. "This is an opportunity, don't lose it."</p> | <p>-Had never even heard about the Great Streets Initiative.</p> <p>-Has heard about the Great Streets Initiative because her store was selected as one of the stores to receive the first phase of street furniture improvements. But she never attended any meetings because she was never informed about them.</p> <p>-Has heard about the Initiative as well as the meetings, but has never actually attended because despite owning a business in the neighborhood, she actually lives outside of the city.</p> <p>-Regularly attends Great Streets Initiative meetings because he is on the Northridge Sparkle Campaign, a volunteer effort that works to clean and beautify Reseda Blvd and other surrounding areas.</p> |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Support; Those who were optimistic about the Great Streets Initiative, or any positive comments about the selected street</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Although there was not much notification about the Great Streets Initiative, it was a pleasant surprise. -San Pedro is a great opportunity for the Great Streets Initiative because Gaffey Street is such a major corridor. -Timing is perfect in terms of targeting Gaffey as a Great Street, because prior work was already being done with the Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan. -Great Streets Initiative is a good idea, but perhaps 6th St or 7th St could be improved instead of Gaffey. -Pacific Ave is better suited for Great Streets improvements than Gaffey. -Gaffey Street is currently operating at LOS C. Could definitely be improved. -Gaffey Street should become a place where people want to stop, not just drive through. -Having Great Streets funding is an opportunity for Gaffey and San Pedro. Should residents just give up and shun improvements because homelessness and crime appear to be too big a problem to handle? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reseda is a nice neighborhood, and we want it to look nice as well. -Reseda Blvd is the busiest street in the neighborhood, definitely most in need of improvements. -As a transit-reliant street user, excited about the new changes that the Great Streets Initiative will help bring to Reseda Blvd. -Many people walk and bike in the area, therefore the amenities for these street users could definitely be improved. -Reseda Boulevard is currently a very unattractive street, so any improvements at all would be welcome. |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Opposition; Those who were pessimistic about the Great Streets Initiative, or any negative comments regarding the selected street</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Street conditions are not Gaffey Street or San Pedro’s greatest problem; homelessness is. Perhaps the money being spent on the Great Streets Initiative would be better spent dealing with the homeless issue. -San Pedro has a very strong car culture. The entire community is opposed to bike lanes and lane reductions. -Gaffey Street is at the end of the 110 Freeway. No matter how much money is spent on improving Gaffey, it will still be the end of the 110 as well as the primary auto and truck corridor into and out of San Pedro. -Most local business owners on Gaffey are not community oriented. -Great Streets improvements that have already occurred (such as the lighting of the pedestrian bridge) are a joke. -How the street looks does not matter. The only thing that matters is that I can drive through quickly. -Gaffey Street is a major thoroughfare and should be catered to fast automobile speeds. -Gaffey Street can never become a great street with the ugly buildings and presence of homeless people. -Residents believe only economic and private investment would drive improvement, not | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Not impressed by the “half-assed” attempts to improve the street, such as the installment of street furniture. -There are limitations to street improvements because some stores do not have sidewalk space. -Does not believe that the proposed improvements for Reseda Blvd. will actually accomplish much in terms of encouraging more walking or bicycling. Seems like the Great Streets Initiative is more of a PR or political move. -Reseda Blvd. will never be a great street. Northridge is too much of a car-centric community. -Traffic congestion is a nightmare on certain sections of Reseda Blvd. -Great Streets Initiative may be a good idea, but how much can it actually accomplish with its limited funding? - Reseda is not the street that is most in need. Other streets in the neighborhood (beyond Parthenia) need more attention. |
|---|--|--|

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| | <p>beautification.</p> <p>-Residents have a lot of concerns about landscaping maintenance. It is great to install more street furniture and trees, but who will maintain them?</p> | |
| Gentrification concerns | <p>-Gentrification would be a positive impact that would not happen or be able to occur without the Great Streets Initiative.</p> <p>-Gentrification would be a good thing.</p> | <p>-Not much of a concern.</p> <p>-Never really thought about it.</p> |
| Street Design Elements | <p>-A very small percentage of people use street parking.</p> <p>-Parking can be a very big issue.</p> <p>-Gaffey Street needs more beautiful businesses, as opposed to the abundance of fast food drive-throughs that currently clutter the street.</p> <p>-Gaffey could use more street trees.</p> <p>-More wayfinding and signage materials would be helpful.</p> | <p>-There are not enough crosswalks; could definitely be improved.</p> <p>-Bike lanes could be improved.</p> <p>-Local businesses could greatly benefit from more street furniture, such as tables and outdoor seating.</p> <p>-Storefronts need to be more attractive. Would prefer a more European style streetscape.</p> <p>-Highlight the unique nature of small businesses along the corridor.</p> <p>-Great Streets Initiative as a whole could do more to create age-friendly communities</p> |

Fig. 9: Table detailing interviewee responses and other community commentary regarding the Great Streets Initiative, Reseda Boulevard, and Gaffey Street

Discussion

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, there are three variables which this research intends to evaluate:

- 1. How well do the local residents and community members feel that they were informed about the Great Streets Initiative and the planning/design process?**
- 2. Do the local residents and community members feel that their input has actually been considered?**
- 3. How do the planners/consultants who are involved with the implementation of the Great Streets Initiative on the two streets feel about their attempts at engaging the community?**

How well do the local residents and community members feel that they were informed about the Great Streets Initiative and the planning/design process?

In regards to this first variable, as can be expected there were several members of the community who were well aware of what the Great Streets Initiative is and what it aims to achieve, and then there were those who had absolutely no idea about the Initiative or any other planned street changes at all. The first thing I learned after speaking with the consulting planners/program managers whose organizations were hired as contractors by the city, Kate Mayerson from LANI for Gaffey Street and Helen Leung from LA-Más for Reseda Boulevard, was that the proposed implementations for the Great Streets Initiative on their streets were just building off of pre-developed plans for streetscape improvements. In other words, by the time the Mayor's office had announced the Great Streets Initiative and the first 15 priority streets,

community stakeholders had already been working on comprehensive street improvement plans such as the Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan and Northridge Vision Plan for some time. As such, the community stakeholders who were heavily involved in the development of the existing street improvement plans were more aware of the Great Streets Initiative or related complete streets concepts. But the levels of understanding about Initiative (in terms of what makes a Great Street and what the Initiative aims to achieve) differed greatly from person to person, even among those who were more involved in the existing community efforts.

Prior to attending the Gaffey Street community meeting I was able to conduct an in-depth interview with two residents of San Pedro, both of whom were members of the Central San Pedro Neighborhood Council and were also heavily involved in the developing of the Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan. One of these residents came from a planning and engineering background, whereas the other resident was practically a beginner to planning concepts. When I asked the more novice resident if she was ever informed about what the Great Streets Initiative is or what it aims to achieve, she answered that it was never explicitly explained to her and that she would be unable to describe exactly what a Great Street comprises. I was surprised that even someone so highly involved in the community and the development of the Conceptual Plan was never specifically informed about the Mayor's Great Streets Initiative, because that does not bode well in terms of how well the less-involved members of the community were informed about the Initiative. However, she later noted that as far as she was concerned, the Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan came first, and although the announcement of the Great Streets Initiative was a pleasant surprise, the "Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan" will be the term she uses to refer to the street redesign plans.

I attended the Gaffey Street community meeting that was held the night of January 8, 2015. The Gaffey Street plan was still very much in the development phase, and the purpose of this community meeting was to have the planners and design consultants present their proposals and several street design options for the Gaffey Street makeover, and collect input from the community. Kate Mayerson from LANI informed me that this was the third public workshop to be held so far, and that public turnout at the previous two meetings was not very high. Surprisingly, attendance for this meeting ended up being somewhere in the hundreds, with standing-room only by the start of the meeting at 6:00pm. So many residents had turned up to this particular meeting because they were angry about a proposed lane reduction. The lane reduction idea was originally suggested to make more space on the street for pedestrian-friendly elements. Several San Pedro residents were made aware of the lane reduction proposal via social media and emails from the Central San Pedro Neighborhood Council, and opposition to the proposal was so great that within 24 hours hundreds of residents had signed an online petition to stop the lane reduction plan³⁰. During the question-and-answer portion of the meeting, many residents expressed anger that they were never made aware of the Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan. Complaints ranged from wanting to be more involved in the decision-making, to “we have no idea who is even involved in the steering committee”. In terms of how well the San Pedro residents and community members felt that they were informed about the Great Streets Initiative and the planning process, the interview responses and public comments suggest that local residents were unhappy with the level of notification regarding community workshops and were

³⁰ Donna Littlejohn, “Possible Lane Reduction on Gaffey Street in San Pedro Draws Vocal Opposition,” *The Daily Breeze*, January 6, 2015, <http://www.dailybreeze.com/general-news/20150106/possible-lane-reduction-on-gaffey-street-in-san-pedro-draws-vocal-opposition>.

therefore unsatisfied with the limited amount of public input regarding Gaffey Street's Great Streets makeover.

The response from community members along Reseda Boulevard was slightly more positive in terms of local residents being informed about the Great Streets Initiative, although at the time I had conducted the interviews there had not yet been a formal community workshop regarding the Initiative. Similar to my Gaffey Street interviews, one of the community members I interviewed on Reseda Boulevard was a member of a neighborhood group known as Northridge Sparkle, which is involved in cleaning and beautification efforts along Reseda Boulevard. As a result of his participation in the Northridge Sparkle group, this resident was aware of the Great Streets Initiative and had participated in many Northridge Sparkle meetings related to Reseda Boulevard makeover efforts. Regarding the less-involved community members, many of the Reseda Boulevard residents and community members who I interviewed had at least heard about the Great Streets Initiative, although they did not attend the meetings. Reasons for not attending the meetings varied from lack of information regarding time and location, to hesitation due to residing outside of the city (in the case of a business owner with an eatery on Reseda Boulevard). One of the residents had heard about the Great Streets Initiative because her business was one of 4 that were selected as part of the first phase of businesses to receive sidewalk enhancements in front of their store. I found it strange that the businesses targeted for Phase 1 of implementation had already been selected with design plans in place, despite the fact that the community as a whole had not yet been consulted about these decisions at an official community workshop.

Several interviewees did state that they had never heard about the Great Streets Initiative, and suggested that this was perhaps because they did not have regular access to a television and were therefore unable to watch the news. Although I was unable to attend the first community

workshop for Reseda Boulevard due to a scheduling conflict, project manager Helen Leung later informed me that the turnout was impressive for the community--over 60 residents had attended this first official community workshop event.

From the interview responses and public commentary that I was able to collect regarding how well local residents felt that they were informed about the Initiative, it would appear that most people had at least heard of the Great Streets Initiative, although they were perhaps not entirely clear on what a Great Street is, nor were they necessarily engaged with the street redesign efforts. The overall level of general public awareness may be attributed to the fact that Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti made personal appearances in both cities to promote the Great Streets Initiative. He held a morning news conference outside a local restaurant on Reseda Boulevard back in early June 2014 to discuss the Initiative and the first 15 selected streets.³¹ Mayor Garcetti also visited Gaffey Street during the pedestrian bridge lighting ceremony in December 2014, the first event to officially kick off the Great Streets efforts in San Pedro.

Do the local residents and community members feel that their input has actually been considered?

In regards to this second question, based on the interview responses I collected and interactions I witnessed at the Gaffey Street community workshop, I believe that the planning and design consultants who were involved in the Great Streets efforts on both streets were extremely mindful of, and responsive to, community input. Based on my observations, community input was more highly considered on Gaffey Street than Reseda Boulevard, but perhaps this is just because I was able to attend a community workshop for Gaffey Street and not for Reseda Boulevard, therefore I was unable to gauge the interaction between the Northridge

³¹ CBS2 News Los Angeles, "Where Are LA's 'Great Streets'? Mayor Garcetti Unveils Urban Renewal Plan," 2014, <http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2014/06/03/where-are-las-great-streets-mayor-garcetti-to-unveil-urban-renewal-plan/>.

community members and the planning team. At this stage of the Great Streets process, based solely on the interview responses I collected and the interactions that I was able to witness in person during my site visits, I would argue that the level of community participation on Gaffey Street could be categorized as genuine participation, whereas on Reseda Boulevard it was more closely demonstrative of pseudoparticipation.

At the Gaffey Street community workshop, when so many of the local residents and community members in attendance voiced their opposition to the proposed lane reduction idea, the planners and design consultants immediately ensured everyone that the lane reduction proposal would no longer be part of the Gaffey Street makeover plans.³² This could be characterized as an example of genuine participation, where community members are empowered and in control of project planning and the decision-making process.¹⁵ From an experience standpoint, although the planners and design consultants are well aware that a lane reduction is consistent with Great Streets goals and could generate benefits such as greater safety for all street users and increased streetspace for pedestrians and bicyclists, due to such massive public opposition the planners were willing to concede their idea in order to ensure that the street design plans actually reflected bottom-up priorities.

I argue that the level of community participation on Reseda Boulevard was more characteristic of pseudoparticipation than genuine participation because of the lack of engagement or dialogue that the community members had with the planners, based on the responses I received from interviewees. To reiterate, pseudoparticipation basically consists of people being in attendance to listen to what has already been planned for them. For example, one

³² Donna Littlejohn, "San Pedro Residents Applaud News That Gaffey Won't See Lane Reductions," *The D*, 2015, <http://www.dailybreeze.com/general-news/20150108/san-pedro-residents-applaud-news-that-gaffey-wont-see-lane-reductions>.

of the interviewees I spoke to was a business owner who operated a gaming store on Reseda Boulevard. She stated that she had received a visit from one of the planners involved in the Great Street makeover several weeks prior, and had been informed that as part of the initial phase of street upgrades, the city would be installing sidewalk furniture such as concrete tables and chairs in the area in front of her store. She said that although she had not personally been consulted about this at any point before this instance, she was happy to have the sidewalk furniture installed because it would be good for business; her store occasionally holds card tournaments on the sidewalk space in front of the business, so the street furniture would be well used. In this example, although the outcome was positive and favorable to all involved stakeholders, the level of community participation was reminiscent of pseudoparticipation because the business owner was essentially just listening to a professional tell her what had already been planned.

However, in a community workshop setting the level of community participation for Reseda Boulevard would likely have the characteristics of genuine participation, similar to the level of participation and consideration of community input on Gaffey Street.

How do the planners/consultants who are involved with the implementation of the Great Streets Initiative on the two streets feel about their attempts at engaging the community?

In general I believe that the planners and consultants who were involved with the implementation of the Great Streets Initiative on both Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard were dedicated in their attempts to engage the community. Although the planners and consultants seemed to rely heavily on the neighborhood councils and community organizations to help spread the word about potential street changes, there was visible effort from the part of the planners to promote the proposals and upcoming events such as the community workshops via flyers and social media. When I visited a popular eatery along Gaffey Street I noticed that there

was a stack of brochures describing the Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan placed on the cashier counter at the front of the restaurant. These brochures contained the contact information of the parties responsible for creating the documentation, and were also labeled with the Los Angeles Great Streets logo, so if any members of the public were interested in learning more or getting involved in the planning process, they knew who to contact. And on Reseda, Helen Leung, the project lead from LA-Más, personally went to inform the business owners of the potential sidewalk enhancements they would be receiving during Phase 1 of the implementation process. I also followed the Facebook accounts of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI), LA-Más, and the Los Angeles Great Streets Initiative, and there was always advance notice of upcoming community workshops and related Great Streets events posted on the page.

Recommendations

What can the Great Streets teams planning for the remaining targeted streets take away from this? Moving forward, what should successful community engagement look at?

- Continued use of social media to encourage community participation
 - Planners should continue to use and explore the use of social media (such as Facebook) as a marketing and public outreach tool. This would allow planners to easily reach a wide demographic, especially the youth population, and gain more diverse feedback regarding street design interests or concerns. As the Gaffey Street example illustrates, the public turnout at the third community workshop was so substantial because news had circulated online, via social media, about the proposal for a lane reduction. Angry residents became very interested in attending the community workshop so they could vocalize their opposition to the

proposal and express other concerns with the planning team. Using social media such as Facebook is both an effective and efficient means of public outreach and community engagement because it is free service, requires very few resources, and is fairly easy to update. Additionally, planners can use social media to post documentation regarding upcoming community meetings (such as the meeting agenda), share images detailing new design proposals, and even administer surveys to learn more about residents' street design preferences. Many people would be more encouraged to weigh in on community issues in this type of setting, where they can participate on their own time within the comforts of their home.

- Increase the opportunities for participatory planning by taking a multi-pronged approach to public outreach
 - Moving forward, the planners working on the Great Streets Initiative should adopt a similar multi-pronged approach to public outreach like the ones taken by New Haven, Arlington, Brooklyn, Greenwich and Stamford as detailed in the earlier section on case studies. In following the Arlington model, in addition to continued cooperation with neighborhood groups and local leaders, the planning team should also include local media as part of its public outreach efforts by having online news outlets and blogs cover proposed street designs and broadcast upcoming community meetings. The city/neighborhoods could also make better use of their websites to include an online survey for collecting resident feedback on the proposed street design improvements. Additionally, although the first 15

Great Streets have already been decided, there are plans to continue adding new streets to that list every year. In this case, the city could follow the New Haven model of developing a new protocol for constructive engagement between community members and city staff that would allow the public to choose the next targeted street for their neighborhood by submitting some type of project request form. By taking this multipronged approach to public outreach where information is presented and gained in multiple formats, the city and planning staff are able to cover all of their bases and ensure that the widest net is cast in terms of encouraging public engagement and gathering as much community feedback as possible.

- Start the planning efforts from scratch
 - When speaking with Helen Leung, the project manager working on Reseda Boulevard, I asked if from her perspective as an urban planner whether or not she believes the efforts on Reseda could be considered true participatory planning. She responded that it did not truly count as participatory planning, rather, it was more of an implementation of existing recommendations. I agree with this statement. The mayor's office initially chose the first 15 Great Streets because they all showed the early signs of economic revitalization. Both Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard already had existing street improvement plans in the works (Gaffey Street Conceptual Plan and Northridge Vision Plan) when selected as Great Streets. Therefore in these two particular cases the Great Streets Initiative is just building off of existing plans developed by a small group of

dedicated community members. But just because a group of community members is involved does not mean that this is an instance of successful community engagement and participatory planning; it just indicates that the ideas are coming from a very small percentage of the community, and not enough input is being considered. In order to achieve more comprehensive and widespread community engagement, rather than building off of existing plans it would be helpful to start the planning efforts from scratch, and communicate with the entire neighborhood using the previously mentioned multipronged approach to determine exactly what the community as a whole wants and needs in terms of street design.

- Approach the participatory planning process by first identifying what the community members truly value
 - To reiterate, the main question I wanted to explore as part of this thesis was “Does the Great Streets Initiative in Los Angeles serve the goals of urban planning from the implementation side?”. Based on my research findings and analysis, at this time I would have to conclude that my answer to this question is “no”. This answer then introduces the following questions: what would be a scenario that could get to the “yes” answer, or what would be a process that could help accomplish both the goals of urban planning and the goals of community participation?

A recommendation for how to get to “yes” would be to use a process along the lines of Los Angeles-based community planner James Rojas’s PLACE IT! process. The PLACE IT! process is a design- and participation-based urban

planning practice which uses model-building workshops and on-site interactive models to help engage the public in the urban planning process.³³ The key to this participation-based urban planning practice is to begin the planning process by identifying what the people in the community value. I was able to learn about this process during an event called *Learn to Charrette* hosted by Columbia University GSAPP on April 22, 2015. At this event in which Rojas facilitated a demonstration of his version of a hands-on community modeling workshop, attendees were asked to recreate an early childhood memory using a series of random trinkets and objects (as illustrated in the figure below).



Fig. 10: James Rojas, *Learn to Charrette*. 2015. Columbia University.

Each workshop attendee was then asked to explain the memory he/she had just created. After hearing about everyone's childhood memories it became clear that there were several recurring themes, such as family and friends, nature, or some form of physical activity. This was significant because by tapping into our memories the process allowed us to gain a better sense of what it is that people

³³ James Rojas, "PLACE IT!," 2014, <http://www.placeit.org/about.html>.

value, and what physical elements were important in shaping our visions of a particular place in time.

The PLACE IT! process is very much hands-on, and is a great way of introducing the public to the idea of urban planning. The process differs from the community workshop approaches taken by the planners/designers involved with the planning on Reseda Boulevard and Gaffey Street in that PLACE IT! utilizes a charrette process which is much more conceptual than it is quantitative. This can be especially useful in engaging community members who are novice to the urban planning and design process. By conducting interactive model-building using random nonsense objects in place of real-life city elements, process participants are able to visualize and understand urban planning and physical design in a more whimsical and less-imposing way. From there, planners can use the conceptual models to identify values and generate real-life plans and policy recommendations.



Fig. 11: James Rojas, *Learn to Charrette*. 2015. Columbia University.

Essentially, rather than starting off a community workshop by gathering public feedback on the proposal of a lane reduction (which will likely result in a bilateral outcome with a segment of outraged community members aiming for an eradication of that proposal), planners may begin by having workshop participants engage in a conceptual interactive activity so that they may learn more about what elements of the city people value. For example, after conducting an interactive workshop, it may become apparent that the community members are most concerned about the fast speeds of the vehicles travelling along their street. After identifying this concern, planners can then begin explaining how a lane reduction could help induce lower vehicle speeds and reduce the likelihood of collisions. This sheds the idea of a lane reduction in a more positive light. Rather than quantitatively and explicitly introducing a planning design concept such as a lane reduction and basically asking the community to agree or disagree with its implementation, the PLACE IT! method allows planners to take on a more negotiatory role by identifying and appealing to what the community truly cares about, then transforming those visions into physical plans and results.

This interactive and conceptual method is a more welcoming procedure that planners can use to simultaneously engage community members in the planning process and accomplish the goals of urban planning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore whether or not the efforts around the Los Angeles Great Streets Initiative thus far have served the goals of urban planning from the implementation side, in terms of meeting the needs of the affected community. The thesis began with an examination of the goals and priorities of the Great Streets Initiative, which included a strong emphasis on community participation in the planning and implementation process. Next, the thesis provided a series of findings including general descriptive and demographic information about the two streets which were furthest along on their Great Streets makeover, as well as interview responses from local community members regarding their opinions on several factors related to community participation and engagement and the Great Streets Initiative. Finally, the thesis considered and interpreted the findings based on three variables of analysis.

Based on my research findings and analysis, at this time I would have to conclude that my answer to the question “does the Great Streets Initiative in Los Angeles serve the goals of urban planning from the implementation side?” is “no”. The results of this research suggest that although the planning and community engagement efforts around the Great Streets Initiative largely served the goals of urban planning from the implementation side in terms of (1) taking the appropriate actions to encourage public participation, (2) the planners’ consideration of community input by responding immediately to negative feedback, and (3) the planners’ willingness to step aside and allow the community members to be empowered decision-makers, the planning and implementation efforts on both Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard cannot be considered true participatory planning. True participatory planning should involve the majority, if not entire community in the planning and decision-making process of the proposed project. Since the Great Street efforts that are occurring on Gaffey Street and Reseda Boulevard both

largely build off of existing plans that were developed by a small segment of the community population (albeit dedicated residents and community leaders), the lack of involvement (and in some cases even the lack of knowledge) of the majority of the residents in the community in much of the initial street design planning phase suggests that despite the best efforts of the city, the planners, and the neighborhood groups, this would not be considered the most successful case of community engagement and participatory planning.

However, moving forward, the Great Streets team and planners in general can look to the recommendations provided in this thesis to improve upon the public outreach and community engagement efforts for the development of the remaining Great Streets, as well as for any future bottom-up planning projects. Through analysis of the related case studies and interview responses, it becomes evident that the more marketing and promotional strategies taken by city staff and planners to increase public awareness about the project, the better, in terms of gaining a more realistic sense of general public perception about the project. Planners could also make better use of the technology that is available to them by increasing the amount of opportunities for public interaction and community engagement that can be completed online. Additionally, if planners began the participatory planning process by simplifying the idea of urban planning and identifying the elements that people in the community truly value, then community engagement and project implementation could become much more effective. All feedback from the public, positive and negative, is beneficial to the planning process with regards to developing the most accurate, context-sensitive solution to meeting the needs of the community.

In regards to the continuing efforts with the Great Streets Initiative, when city staff and planners are dedicated to establishing relationships with the community, and willing to maintain all possible avenues of communication with the public to ensure that everyone always has access

to objective information and understands the issues at hand, community members may become more likely to participate in the planning process and feel encouraged to provide their sincere input, thus planners are better able to deliver a quality project that caters to the needs of that specific community; this is what successful community engagement looks like.

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