

Active Transportation Planning in Unincorporated Communities

Our third, and final, installment of Strengthening Partnerships: A 2022 Peer Exchange Series for former Community Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Training (CPBST) sites was held virtually on April 12, 2022. Sponsored by the California Office of Traffic Safety, UC Berkeley SafeTREC and Cal Walks brought together about 25 people who live in or work with former CPBST sites to discuss the specific challenges of active transportation planning in unincorporated communities. These participants represented a diverse array of unincorporated communities, from small towns in rural California, to more-densely populated urban and semi-urban communities across the state.

Peer Exchange Overview

Over the last five years, SafeTREC and Cal Walks have conducted 72 CPBST workshops statewide, including nearly 25% in unincorporated communities. We invited local leaders from the CPBST communities to this peer exchange to network and learn from their peers as well as to support the implementation of recommendations developed during their workshops. With nearly 60% of registrants familiar or very familiar with the topic, this peer exchange asked participants to share some of the challenges they have faced in active transportation planning and provided them with an overview of strategies and funding opportunities. This was followed by a facilitated discussion where attendees shared their successes, challenges, and lessons learned in their communities with building relationships to support active transportation planning.

Challenges

Unincorporated communities are all unique and face different obstacles to active transportation planning. Participants identified challenges shared by some of the represented communities. Perhaps the most common was a difficulty in establishing community transportation safety priorities, whether due to the large geographic area covered or conflicting uses of the roads. Different priorities may stem from different visions of the community or concepts of the community's culture. For example, several participants said that balancing parking with other road uses, such as recreation, was a concern for their agency or in their community.

Another challenge named by participants was difficulty in getting participation from the community when planning infrastructure improvements and safety programs. Many of the causes were the same as those related to community priorities, specifically large coverage areas and conflicting interests among road users. Some participants also shared that these issues, plus a lack of knowledge about the safety impacts of certain road improvements, made it difficult to know what the public reaction would be to new plans or policies.

A third challenge expressed by many participants was a lack of local community capacity to develop and implement active transportation safety programs or infrastructure. While the specific structure of local government varied among the communities, a lack of funding and specialized transportation safety planning and design expertise at the local level was cited by participants. They also expressed difficulty with getting support from higher levels of government. This difficulty with engaging levels of government who could provide the missing capacity is exacerbated by the first two challenges.

One final challenge that some participants expressed was a lack of community understanding of how the organizational structure of their local government relates to decision making and funding opportunities. People reported confusion about jurisdiction over particular roadways, as well as who to contact with specific concerns or questions. Participants also mentioned the challenge of needing to articulate concerns in technical language in order for governmental officials to understand or listen.

Strategies

During the peer exchange, we presented and discussed a few strategies for addressing some of the challenges identified. First, we underlined how important it is for transportation professionals to continue to listen to and communicate with the community. The first two challenges underscore the importance of continuing dialogue with the goal that shared priorities and engagement can emerge over time. Transportation professionals can partner with local institutions or help create a local institution if none exists. Not only will this allow community members to learn more about each other's priorities, it can also help the community pool expertise and resources to overcome some capacity limitations.

The second strategy is to use every level of government available. This directly responds to the lack of capacity, especially when a community has already asked for agency support without success. Often, various grant programs and other approaches are available at the local, county, regional, and state levels. Regional transportation planning organizations, in the form of a [Regional Transportation Planning Agency \(RTPA\) or Metropolitan Planning Organization \(MPO\)](#), can provide planning and programming support for transportation safety. Some counties have a parallel County Transportation Commissions that may fill a similar role at a more local level, which adds further complexity to understanding where transportation safety decisions are made. Finally, both elected officials and agency staff may have programs, tools, and information that can help an unincorporated community. By seeking to work along multiple avenues, a community may be able to overcome barriers to building capacity.

The third strategy is to seek resources across a wide variety of topics, rather than only within the transportation safety or planning space. Many agencies and organizations provide funding or other resources for programs that intersect with transportation safety and that could be used to support this work. One prominent example is public health departments, which support active transportation and transportation safety. Another example is programs which seek to promote older adult health by addressing disproportionate health impacts and promoting improvements to enhance their safety as road users. Of course, due to the differences among unincorporated communities, some multidisciplinary topics will be a better match than others and the most promising opportunities can only be identified by looking into specific programs or funding sources.

Opportunities

At the peer exchange, participants shared grant opportunities and discussed the kinds of resources that exist for unincorporated communities. It is important for an unincorporated community to advocate for their transportation safety needs with their county transportation agencies who typically have more resources to compete for funding as opportunities arise. Likewise, communities may be an important resource for county governments in this process as local support and demonstrated community engagement are often critical for grant and program success. Also, an unincorporated community should build relationships with their regional government body. As stated earlier, an RTPA or MPO may fund transportation safety planning and offer a variety of other useful programs.

- The Southern California Area of Governments (SCAG) offers the [Go Human Mini-Grants Program](#), which supports local traffic safety projects. SCAG also offers the [Go Human Kit of Parts](#), which is a set of resources for temporary Complete Street demonstration projects. Communities in northern and central California can also apply to borrow these resources through the Active Transportation Resource Center's (ATRC) [Go Human Kit of Parts Pilot Program](#).

Grants that are accepting applications as of May 2022:

- Active Transportation Resource Center (ATRC) [Go Human Kit of Parts Pilot Program](#)
- Caltrans [Active Transportation Program \(ATP\)](#), [Highway Safety Improvement Program](#), and [Sustainable Communities Planning Grants](#)
- California Strategic Growth Council [Transformative Climate Communities](#)

State agencies offer a wide array of grant programs that may potentially apply to active transportation in an unincorporated area. Timelines on these grant programs vary; therefore, it is worth monitoring them to learn when a new round of grants - or a new grant program - opens. Some agencies may keep a mailing list of interested applicants, as well. Some grants require an agency applicant or other coordination with an agency.

- The [California Office of Traffic Safety](#) (OTS) offers a grant program, which supports many kinds of active transportation safety campaigns and education.
- The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) offers the [Active Transportation Program](#) (ATP) to encourage increased use of active modes of transportation. In Cycle 6, only 50% of funds will be allocated directly by the state. Another 40% of funds will be distributed by MPOs to large urban areas and 10% is earmarked for small urban and rural areas.
- Caltrans also offers the [Highway Safety Improvement Program](#) and the [State Highway Operations and Protection Program](#), which can also support active transportation safety projects. The Caltrans Division of Transportation Planning offers [Sustainable Communities Planning Grants](#), which supports many types of active transportation planning.
- The California Department of Housing and Community Development offers the [Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities Program](#), which can support active transportation infrastructure and education.
- The California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA) and the Caltrans Division of Rail and Mass Transportation offer the [Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program](#), which can support first and line mile connection projects as well as active transportation improvement, education, and outreach programs.
- The California Natural Resources Agency offers the [Urban Greening Program](#), which can support active transportation infrastructure.
- The California Strategic Growth Council offers the [Transformative Climate Communities Program](#), which can support active transportation infrastructure and bike share programs.

- The California Air Resources Board offers the [Clean Mobility Options Program](#), which can support bike share programs, and the [Sustainable Transportation Equity Project](#), which can support active transportation infrastructure, planning, and capacity building programs.
- The California Transportation Commission offers the [Local Partnership Program](#), the [Solutions for Congested Corridors Program](#), and the [State Transportation Improvement Program](#), all of which can support active transportation infrastructure for different types of agency applicants and in different circumstances.
- The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law established a new [Safe Streets and Roads for All \(SS4A\) Program](#), administered by the US Department of Transportation, which offers both Action Plan Grants and Implementation Grants.
- The [Active Transportation Research Center](#) offers a wealth of knowledge and resources on active transportation, as well as providing training and technical assistance.

Finally, organizations and businesses may offer support. At the peer exchange, participants shared a number of such non-governmental resources.

- AARP offers [Livable Communities Challenge Grants](#), which supports “quick-action projects” in a variety of topics, including transportation and mobility.
- America Walks offers fellowships for their [Walking College Program](#), which works to build capacity by educating and empowering individuals.

The programs highlighted in this summary are not intended to be a comprehensive database of funding opportunities for active transportation planning or implementation. Eligibility for these funding sources and programs may vary.

Programs in Action

Throughout the peer exchange, participants mentioned a number of active transportation projects they were working on or victories they had achieved. These are valuable examples of what unincorporated communities can accomplish. One participant shared a success with community engagement, where they had consulted with business owners in a project area and the business owners had suggested a change that better met the community's needs. This participant noted that, in this case, they were able to achieve greater community consensus by noting the economic advantages that the safety improvements would bring to the businesses.

Quite a few participants noted efforts to build improvements for bicyclists in rural areas. Participants shared a few solutions, including bike lanes on uphill portions and sharrows on downhill portions. A few examples were mentioned, including [a project incorporating this design in San Francisco](#). Though San Francisco is neither rural nor unincorporated, their concerns about narrow lane widths and steep hills are shared by many communities. Another potential solution is bike turnouts, short bike lanes alongside a roadway which provide space for cyclists to allow motor vehicles to pass safely, which are mentioned in [this newspaper article about narrow, rural roads near Mount Diablo](#).

Finally, one of our participants from unincorporated Altadena, in Los Angeles County, shared a few of their local victories, including [this video featuring a Walk to School Day](#) that was launched after the CPBST workshop in their community and [this report summarizing the on-bike assessment in Altadena](#) that was a CPBST workshop follow-up.

Next Steps

UC Berkeley SafeTREC and California Walks provide [follow-up technical assistance](#) to communities that have hosted a CPBST. If a community has not had a workshop or the workshop focus area was in a different neighborhood, consider [applying for a CPBST workshop](#). We look forward to continuing the conversation from this peer exchange and learning how to better serve unincorporated communities!

About the CPBST

The Community Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Training (CPBST) program is a statewide active transportation and community engagement project of [UC Berkeley Safe Transportation Research and Education Center](#) (SafeTREC) and [California Walks](#) (Cal Walks). It uses an adapted [Safe System Approach](#) to engage residents and advocates to develop an action plan to improve active transportation safety in their communities, support complete streets planning, and strengthen collaboration with local officials and agency staff.

Funding for this program was provided by a grant from the [California Office of Traffic Safety](#), through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

