Complete Streets Safety Assessment Peer Exchange 2024

Funding and the Importance of Public Involvement in Implementing Suggestions

Peer Exchange Overview

UC Berkeley SafeTREC convened a peer exchange session with former and current Complete Streets Safety Assessment (CSSA) program participants. The goal of the peer exchange was to bring together local agencies to participate in a discussion around community engagement and funding for infrastructure improvements. The purpose of this peer exchange was also to provide a platform for the local agencies that had a CSSA to help other agencies in moving forward with implementation of the suggestions in their CSSA reports, and to help them to find ways to overcome barriers and challenges to implementing the suggested improvements. As of 2024, nearly 100 CSSAs have been conducted statewide.

SafeTREC staff developed and conducted an evaluation survey in 2020 to gauge the successes and barriers of former agencies in implementing safety improvement recommendations. The top barriers identified by agencies were related to time constraints, community and political opposition or lack of support, lack of funding and funding opportunities, and infrastructural limitations. Based on those responses, it was imperative that agencies were brought together to share experiences and insight with regard to implementing safety improvements suggested in their reports.

On Tuesday, July 11, 2024, participants joined a peer exchange and engaged with Phillip Soares, a traffic engineer from the City of Modesto. He shared the progress the City of Modesto has made in implementing the safety improvements suggested in their July 2016 CSSA final report. The peer exchange was convened virtually via Zoom, and attendees were able to ask questions and provide insight into some of their success stories and challenges with implementing improvements as recommended in their CSSA reports.

Summary and Discussion: What did attendees learn?

At the beginning of the event, SafeTREC staff presented the conception and history of the CSSA Program and reminded the attendees the purpose of the peer exchange. Participants were prompted to consider the following as they relate to work in their communities:

- How to move forward with implementation of the safety improvement suggestions;
- What helped in implementing the safety improvement suggestions;
- What challenges they encountered in implementing safety improvement suggestions;
- How to overcome challenges when implementing the safety improvement suggestions; and
- How to improve the CSSA Program to better help local agencies

Soares shared some background information about the City of Modesto, including how the City maintains over 29,500 traffic signs and installed about 47 roundabouts to become the “Roundabout Capital of California”. One of the main barriers discussed was the lack of resources, including engineering staff to help design and implement new infrastructure projects. Applying and receiving funding from competitive grants is another consistent challenge, because, once funding is secured, the City still has to administer it and meet deliverables. Specifically, Soares emphasized elected officials’ misperception of “free money” as it relates to funding requirements and the staff effort needed to execute projects. He shared what funding sources Modesto was able to secure for their projects, including the allocation of shared funding streams whether through partnering with other partners or funding different phases or components of a larger project. Soares also shared how unreported crashes may skew data for planners and engineers to make the best decisions regarding improvements.

Soares shared his approach to success – Strategy for Success – which is a triangle model inclusive of people, graphics, and tactical urbanism as seen in Figure 1.

1. About people, he shared that elected officials, engineers, and the public each play a role. Each party is essential in meeting goals, and a champion is needed to advocate for any project-related strategy along with the elected officials and the public. Relationships between the city and county government played a large role in securing funding and implementing projects. Furthermore, developing and retaining in-house expertise among the team can make the city more competitive for future safety projects.

2. The use of great graphics to explain infrastructure concepts plays an integral part when implementing recommendations as seen in Figure 2. Soares advised agencies to show renderings with trees, plants, and people, so people can better grasp and envision potential concepts or improvements instead of engineering plans which can be too technical and difficult to understand.

3. Soares shared how the City of Modesto used “tactical urbanism”, or temporary demonstrations with low-cost materials to test a potential street design change and collect public feedback before pursuing capital improvements as seen in Figure 3.

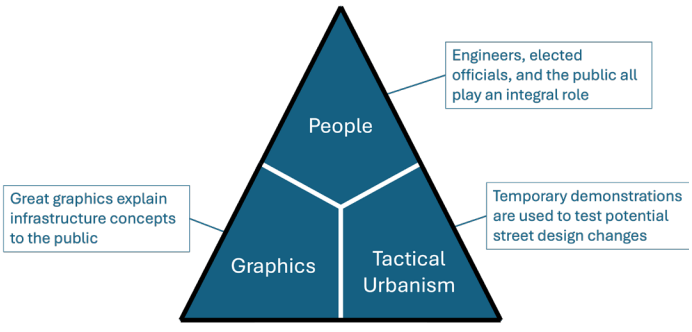

Figure 1: Graphic of Soares’ “Strategy for Success” triangle model. Source: SafeTREC, 2024

Within the Safe System model, Modesto prioritizes physical infrastructure improvements for traffic calming to reduce reliance on law enforcement. Soares shared some of the challenges the City of Modesto faced when implementing infrastructure improvements. Similar to many of their local and state counterparts, recruiting transportation engineers is difficult. He also mentioned that all grants are very competitive; matching funds and demonstrating community engagement is also challenging. As an example, Soares used the Active Transportation Program (ATP) which he stated that it is difficult to secure funds, report and meet grant requirements.

Figure 2: Top graphic of a greenway and multi-use path next to a two-lane road and bottom graphic of a roundabout. Source: City of Modesto, 2024.

Figure 3: Graphic of “tactical urbanism” or temporary demonstrations before and after project. Source: City of Modesto, 2024.

Looking forward, Soares recommended participants explore housing grants in addition to traditional transportation funding opportunities. The Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) Program is one such opportunity to invest in transportation safety improvements alongside housing development. For more information about the intersection of housing and transportation, please review SafeTREC’s research brief entitled “Mobility Safety for California’s Affordable Housing Residents: Co-locating Improvements”.

Discussion

After the presentation, SafeTREC staff facilitated a discussion session for attendees to discuss Soares' presentation and continue brainstorming potential strategies for overcoming challenges local agencies' staff face in implementing the suggested improvements. The following summarizes this discussion.

Participants discussed public engagement efforts and what they've found to be most useful:

Q: Who led the public engagement efforts?
Soares shared that an assistant engineer with a salesman mentality led the public engagement efforts in Modesto. Furthermore, it is best to start with low-hanging fruit and build off those successes to get the public on board with implementing new projects.

Q: What did you find the most helpful in public engagement efforts?
Soares shared that public meetings are most helpful in persuading politicians and obtaining sufficient public feedback. Collaborating with the planning department and documenting efforts to have more political coverage is important. For example, there was a "bad curve" in the city that caused a lawsuit.

Q: What can agencies do to strengthen engagement in traffic projects?
Soares stated that police enforcement, community support, and traffic calming strengthen engagement in traffic projects. He reiterated that traffic calming is critical because law enforcement can only be present for a small amount of time. Moreover, he shared that temporary demonstrations can be effective at settling differences when implementing infrastructure changes.

Participants were interested in how to make "great graphics" of active transportation safety improvements.

Q: What programs are the renderings made with? Are graphic renderings done in-house or contracted out?
Soares shared that their 3-D housing graphic was done by the architect who worked on a housing development project in the city of Modesto. The 2-D rendering was done in-house using AutoCAD computer software. The city received 15 million dollars to make pedestrian and bicycling improvements. Soares also shared that approximately 90% of their graphic renderings are developed internally.

The City of Santa Rosa shared an example of the importance of timing in public engagement on traffic safety projects. The City was interested in removing one traffic lane on an arterial near an elementary school. They conducted the Steele Lane Pilot Project to test Safe Routes to School access to Steele Lane Elementary School, and to allow City staff to understand how more bus, bicycle, and pedestrian space in front of the elementary school may help students and parents access the school. Rather than approach the public at the onset of their project, they waited until they collected data through a pilot study and secured the support of the city council before engaging the public. This changed the discourse from "how dare you remove a traffic lane?" to "a school safety project for children, and how dare you not care about children's safety?" as the City of Santa Rosa swayed public support on the project.

Conclusion

The “Complete Streets” concept applies a wide range of safety countermeasures and strategies to develop a system that is safe for all road users. As we reconfigure roads to calm traffic in alignment with the CSSA report and Safe System principles, public engagement is both critical for securing funds and for ensuring the greatest success of traffic safety measures. The City of Modesto shared how they were able to leverage their CSSA report to engage the public and secure funding for safety improvement projects. The peer exchange convened former and current CSSA sites to discuss tactics for implementing the recommendations from their assessments. Strong clear communications, including great graphics, tactical urbanism “temporary demonstrations”, and knowing how and when to engage the public are important for improving the likelihood of success in implementing an active transportation safety project. Furthermore, participants also reinforced the need to identify, nurture, and leverage traffic safety champions at all levels, from residents to agency staff to elected officials, because everyone is a road user and has a stake in it.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Phillip Soares from the City of Modesto for sharing his experiences with the CSSA program and presenting in our 2024 CSSA peer exchange.

Cover image by Modesto City Engineer Michael Sauskie

About the Program

This peer exchange was conducted as part of the Complete Streets Safety Assessment (CSSA) program. The aim of the CSSA is to help communities identify and implement traffic safety solutions that lead to improved safety and accessibility for all users, especially people walking and biking, on California’s roadways. We partner with applicant sites across the state to conduct comprehensive transportation safety assessments that focus on pedestrian and bicycle safety. For more information, visit: https://bit.ly/CPBSP or email us at safetrec@berkeley.edu.

About the Funder

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The Safe Transportation Research and Education Center (SafeTREC) is a University of California, Berkeley research center affiliated with the Institute of Transportation Studies and the School of Public Health. Our mission is to inform decision-making and empower communities to improve roadway safety for all. We envision a world with zero roadway fatalities or serious injuries and a culture that prioritizes safe mobility.

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