

Driving Results

for Community Safety and Health

Temporary traffic circle installation with residents and local artist

Until recently, in the Near Northwest Neighborhood in South Bend, Indiana, chronic, reckless speeding often left people afraid to walk along their own streets or even let their children play outside. Installing traffic calming measures was an obvious solution, and something the residents were urging the city to address. Thanks to a conversation among South Bend's engineering department and a range of partners, the residents received a lot more.

Ignited by participation in the Smart Growth America's Safe Streets Academy, the city's engineering department began to broaden its thinking. Engineers began to see safe streets as a platform for addressing other neighborhood issues, like vibrancy and resident health and wellness. The department started by collaborating with other city agencies, the county's public health department, the local Metropolitan Planning Organization and the public transit agency.

“

People really questioned why public health officials would be involved in a traffic project, but actions began speaking louder than words.”

- Theresa Harrison, City of South Bend

“As engineers, we do a whole lot better lecturing people than engaging with them,” says South Bend civil engineer Theresa Harrison, P.E., Env SP, M.ASCE, and a member of ASCE's Committee on Sustainability. That began to change as she and her colleagues started to move outside their comfort zones and build real relationships with neighborhood residents. Instead of PowerPoint presentations at community meetings, the engineering department and its partners staffed information tables at neighborhood gatherings. Instead of talking at people, they were talking with them.

While the process to create safer streets evolved, other positive outcomes began to emerge across the middle- and low-income neighborhood. For instance, as the health department became engaged in transportation improvements, an array of related benefits started to accrue. Along with access to more public spaces for things like walking, biking and play, health officials were able to begin much-needed conversations about pressing concerns like vaccination, chronic diseases and even lead in homes—a major issue in a neighborhood with numerous older residences. “At first, people really questioned why public health officials would be involved in a traffic project, but actions began speaking louder than words,” Harrison says.

“This approach has been a huge success,” Harrison says. “We began by trying a new way of thinking, and now we're hooked. We're employing a multidisciplinary team approach and community engagement more often now as we become more comfortable with the process and see the benefits and outcomes.”



Temporary traffic circle installation, prior to painting



Conversation guide

Projects and initiatives related to health and health equity in the built environment often start with a conversation between individuals or among small groups. It may be a formal convening led by a foundation or city agency, a workshop at a convention or even coffee between colleagues.

The Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities is engaged in a year-long effort to spur these conversations among our members and beyond. We've compiled stories about discussions that have led to healthy solutions at the community, regional and state levels.

Here are the questions they asked in South Bend →



Gathering neighborhood input

WHO'S COME TO THE TABLE SO FAR

- City of South Bend Department of Public Works (includes Division of Engineering and Division of Streets & Sewers)
- City of South Bend Department of Venues, Parks, & Arts
- City of South Bend Department of Community Investment (including Planning & Community Resources Divisions)
- City of South Bend Fire Department
- Michiana Area Council of Governments (MACOG, local Metropolitan Planning Organization)
- Near Northwest Neighborhood (NNN) Association
- St. Joseph County Health Department
- South Bend Public Transportation Corporation (Transpo)

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Residents in South Bend were concerned about motorists speeding in their neighborhood. They did the natural thing and contacted the city. But then the conversation on traditional traffic calming measures—like speed humps, radar speed signs, traffic circles, chicanes and bumpouts—began to take on a wider lens. The city's engineering department professionals began asking themselves:

- What can we provide the residents beyond what we've always done?
- How can we include the entire community in discussing a broader range of solutions instead of just presenting to them?
- What concerns beyond speeding might the community have, such as safety, public transportation access and creating a more healthy community?
- Where do health and health equity fit into the picture and at what point in the process?

2. BUILDING OUT THE CONVERSATION

Based on training from Smart Growth America's Safe Streets Academy, the discussion within the community and among partners broadened further through these questions:

- Who else do we need to involve so that what's always been done happens differently and better?
- What can each party bring to the table that we don't have already?
- What knowledge or information do they need from us to be effective partners; what do we need to know from them?
- How do we maximize opportunities together that we couldn't achieve on our own?

3. CLOSING THE LOOP

As the city targeted specific plans with partners, questions that guided the process included:

- Have we made sure that we've included the needs and desires of most of the residents, not just the most vocal ones?
- How do we make sure that the health benefits of our project directly or indirectly benefit all residents in a diverse neighborhood?
- How do we structure our project team to be truly collaborative and to let each member lead in the areas where they're strongest?

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) defines sustainability as a set of economic, environmental and social conditions (aka "The Triple Bottom Line") in which all of society has the capacity and opportunity to maintain and improve its quality of life indefinitely without degrading the quantity, quality or availability of economic, environmental and social resources. Sustainable development is the application of these resources to enhance the safety, welfare and quality of life for all of society.

ASCE's Policy 418 - Role of the Civil Engineer in Sustainable Development is in line with the goals of the Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities; the city of South Bend's project is a strong example of putting the sustainable design elements to good use.