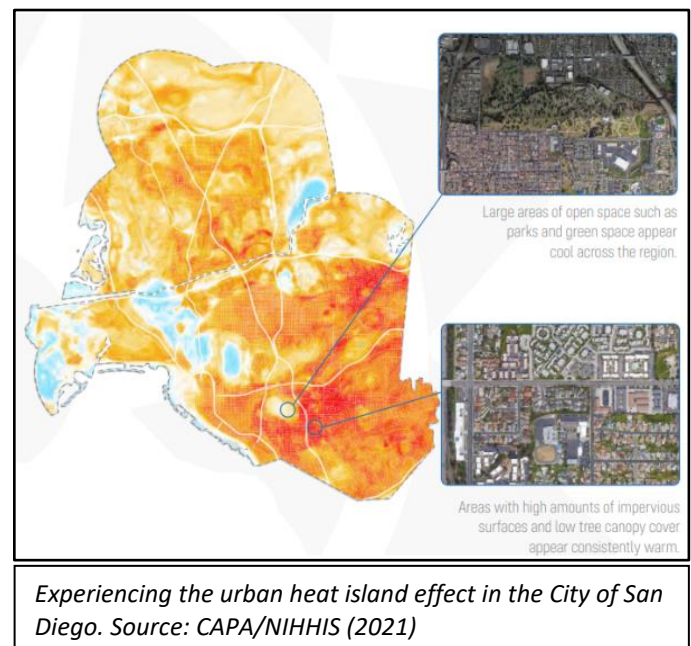


The Urban Collaborative Project - 2023 Resident Leadership Academy

Background

Decades of financial disinvestment and inequitable policies have resulted in Southeast San Diego (SESD) ranking amongst California's worst when it comes to cumulative public health and environmental health impacts. Several of its neighborhoods fall within the bottom quartile of California's Healthy Places Index and rank within the top 25th percentile of disadvantaged communities in CalEnviroScreen 4.0.^{1, 2} According to the San Diego Association of Governments, 48% of regional emissions of greenhouse gasses are sourced from on-road transportation (including light-duty and heavy-duty vehicles).³ Being that SESD has been heavily divided by highway infrastructure, its residents are further disproportionately impacted by air pollution and poor air quality.

SESD is also more vulnerable to the urban heat island (UHI) effect. The UHI is a concentration of higher temperatures within communities due to the absorption of heat by urban infrastructure. A 2021 study tracked heat in the City of San Diego at certain times of the day—the SESD community experienced elevated UHI when compared to other areas.⁴ Elevated heat can increase energy costs (e.g., for air conditioning), air pollution levels, and heat-related illness and mortality. Tree equity scores indicate that increasing tree canopies in SESD is a high priority when compared to other communities in San Diego.⁵ Overall, trees can play a big role in improving community health and the built environment. Growing trees can help mitigate public health and environmental health impacts caused by pollution, extreme heat events, and other



¹ California Healthy Places Index Map, map.healthyplacesindex.org/?view=0673af0e-0760-4d21-a540-fc353778a686

² CalEnviroScreen 4.0 SB 535 Disadvantaged Communities Map, <https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen/sb535>

³ SANDAG 2021 Regional Plan, Appendix X, <https://www.sandag.org/-/media/SANDAG/Documents/PDF/regional-plan/sustainable-growth-and-development/greenhouse-gas-emission-targets/2021-regional-plan-appendix-x-2021-12-01.pdf>

⁴ CAPA Strategies (2021), San Diego, California Heat Watch Report, https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/heat_watch_san_diego_report.pdf

⁵ Tree Equity Score Map, <https://www.treeequityscore.org/map#13.01/32.71291/-117.08617>

sources. Trees provide clean air to breathe, carbon sequestration, environmental cooling, and can also decrease mental stress and promote walking for exercise and recreation.

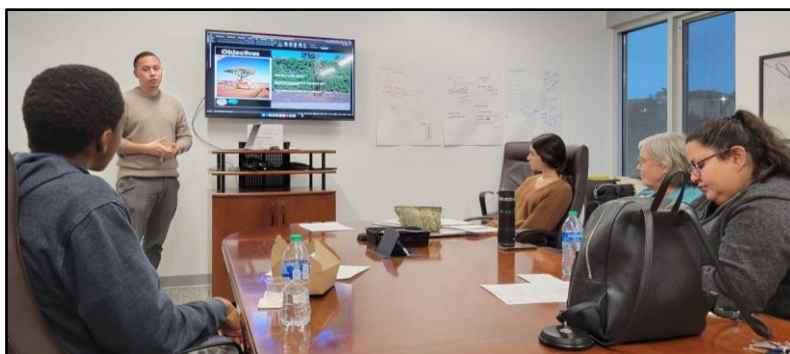
Improvements to the built environment should promote health equity and environmental justice in under-resourced communities, and community members should be at the forefront of these efforts. The Urban Collaborative Project (UCP) hosts monthly community meetings where residents discuss priorities and solutions focusing on transportation, housing, and infrastructure in SED. The intersection of health and the built environment is a recurring theme, with community members highlighting existing poor health conditions in SED and the need for increased tree canopies, safe and walkable neighborhoods, and an improved public transportation system. One of the recurring conversations includes the inequity of tree coverage in SED when compared to other communities. How can the community work together to increase trees in SED? To answer this, UCP decided to develop a Resident Leadership Academy (RLA) focusing on increasing trees in SED in partnership with Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP), Tree San Diego, Kate Sessions Commitment, several subject matter experts, and passionate resident leaders.

Resident Leadership Academy

The RLA is a model developed by CHIP that empowers residents with the skills, tools, and leadership training needed to identify and effectively address neighborhood issues together. Aligning with these values, UCP recruited six (6) passionate leaders to participate in a RLA with the mission of cultivating their capacity as leaders, organizers, and advocates for trees in SED. The RLA culminated with the planting of several trees within SED. The goals of the 2023 RLA cohort were as follows:

1. Increase trees in SED to improve health and climate action in our community.
2. Advocate for tree equity in SED by sharing information about our community's needs, including resources and tree maintenance alternatives.

The RLA cohort included residents from Emerald Hills, Valencia Park, Oak Park, and a tree advocate from Kate Sessions Commitment. Half of the participants were youth under the age of 18. The participants engaged in a tailored nine-week curriculum to learn from local government leaders, urban foresters, community organizers, and other subject matter experts from across the San Diego region on the topic of trees and community health. Partners from the San Diego Urban Sustainability Coalition, Kate Sessions Commitment, Paradise Gardeners, and Tree San Diego covered topics involving environmental justice, tree maintenance, and advocacy.



The RLA cohort listens to Nick Buenviaje, the Legislative Affairs & Community Engagement representative from Caltrans District 11, to learn about the relationship between urban greening and transportation.

The RLA cohort also learned about Maintenance Assessment Districts (MADs) which are needed to ensure street trees planted in the City of San Diego public right-of-way are properly tended to. MADs are managed by the City of San Diego's Parks and Recreation Department and the City Planning and Community Investment Department. According to the City of San Diego, "A MAD is legal mechanism by which property owners can vote to assess themselves to pay for and receive services above-and-beyond what the City normally provides."⁶ These can include improvements, such as maintenance of landscaping, community signage, litter removal, and more. SESD does not have a comprehensive MAD, but rather pockets of MADs spread out throughout the community.⁷ Thus, the RLA cohort decided to focus their climate action efforts on planting trees on school campuses. School campuses were able to agree to providing the necessary watering and maintenance of the trees to ensure that they can grow successfully once planted. The team also wanted to encourage climate action among youth in the community and improve the built environment that impacts youth daily. The first RLA tree project began with the planting of two trees at Horton Elementary School in the Chollas View neighborhood, in partnership with Tree San Diego who was able to provide the technical training and trees for the project.



Michael Jones, Assistant Deputy Director for the City of San Diego Parks and Recreation Department, teaches the RLA cohort all about Maintenance Assessment Districts.



The RLA cohort with Tree San Diego representatives planting one of the trees at Horton Elementary School.

⁶ City of San Diego, Maintenance Assessment Districts, <https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/park-and-recreation/pdf/madformationhandout.pdf>

⁷ City of San Diego, map of Maintenance Assessment Districts, <https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/park-and-recreation/pdf/madmap.pdf>

With the first tree project being a success, the RLA team was determined to continue their tree-planting efforts at another school. Two of the RLA participants were students from Gompers Preparatory Academy (GPA) and wanted to increase trees on their campus too and get other students involved. They worked with UCP, Tree San Diego, and GPA staff to coordinate a tree planting project at the school. GPA staff and an urban forester from TSD identified an empty strip of dirt ready to be beautified and brought to life with trees. The project was able to be completed in time to honor California Clean Air Day in October 2023 with the planting of 10 beautiful trees. The RLA's second tree project convened over 30 volunteers and supporters, including seven students from GPA. A representative from the City of San Diego Planning Department was also present.



Tree San Diego teaching Gompers Preparatory Academy students, RLA ambassadors, and volunteers how to properly plant a tree.

Conclusion

Understanding SESD's climate and environmental justice needs through data and community voices, UCP teamed up with several partners to create an engaging RLA program that promoted community-led climate action, resident leadership, and capacity-building. Though the RLA has culminated, the skills that the RLA Ambassadors learned will continue to serve them and their community as they keep on advocating for trees in SESD and other under-resourced communities. UCP will continue to work with the RLA Ambassadors and other community leaders to increase tree equity in SESD and beyond. Community-led urban greening planning and environmental justice action in SESD will continue in 2024 with UCP's newly awarded Transformative Climate Communities Planning Grant from the Strategic Growth Council. Additionally, any SESD school interested in planting trees at their campus with the RLA Ambassadors should contact the UCP team at c.paz@ucproject.org. Every tree counts!



Volunteers, supporters, and RLA Ambassadors participating in the RLA's second tree project at Gompers Preparatory Academy.