

A Great Neighborhood Improvement Project: Broadway-Manchester Street Scape

Host: Paul Napier
In-Studio Guests: Elizabeth McClellan, Empowerment Congress Southeast Area
Neighborhood Development Council
Patricia Airiza, Public Works, Bureau of Street Services
Jerry Caropino, Public Works, Bureau of Street Services
Insert Guest: Elizabeth McClellan, Empowerment Congress Southeast Area
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Paul: Would you like to know how to get a community project started? My guests today will take us through all the steps. Joining us are Patricia Airiza and Jerry Caropino from the City of Los Angeles Public Works Department, Bureau of Street Services. Through out Los Angeles, our various communities have so many needs in getting things done. We all know it's difficult for City Hall to do them alone, so it's excellent when communities undertake on some of the projects themselves. How do you get things started when you want to get a community project off the ground?

Patricia: I think one of the first steps would be for community members to organize themselves into a group and discuss what they are looking to do in their community, narrow it down to what their angle is. For example if they want to improve their streets, they need to ask whether they want to improve the sidewalk or add street trees or maybe both. Once they've organized themselves, the next step would be to bring their concerns to their local Neighborhood Council meeting and discuss their plan. In short, your Neighborhood Council is an important factor in the whole process. Of course, another important major component is funding the project.

Paul: Patricia, you suggest going to their Neighborhood Council. Are there Neighborhood Councils in every part of Los Angeles? Is it better for the community to first present their ideas to the Neighborhood Council and then to their local City Council Office?

Patricia: I would recommend it would be the first step for the community to bring it to their Neighborhood Council. The Neighborhood Council is essential. It's better because when the Neighborhood Council presents their project to their City Council Office then there's a bit more legitimacy behind it.

Paul: Once the project is initiated, at least the concept, and the city as well as the Neighborhood Council, is in agreement with it, it then goes to the whole City Council, for approval, correct. Are there instances where the project goes directly to a city department?

Patricia: The most common approach that I've experienced would be once the perimeters of the preliminary design is discussed within the group and the budget is established, then we have different entities of the city, different organization agencies, help facilitate the design. There are

a lot of people involved, not just one organization. Street Services becomes the consultants for the neighborhood and we do the actual construction plans. The design and the allocation of funds may take an average of three years. It takes a long time to do these plans. It takes a long time to secure the funding and to have the final design.

Paul: These various preliminary steps take a couple of years? This isn't something that's overnight.

Patricia: It takes approximately three years from my experience. From getting the funding to the actual breaking ground and starting the construction.

Paul: Patricia you mentioned construction, I think that's your cue Jerry because you're the point person on that end. How are you involved?

Jerry: Yes, I actually do handle the construction end. Once we get an approved set of plans my crew will go out, between our 16 crews and do the construction work, based on the approved set of plans, which the Neighborhood Council has a say in.

Paul: I have this thing, when you are on the freeway, which I appreciate is not the city, but when you want to go on a street that you may have never driven on before because you're going into a neighborhood on an errand, how do you guys know the night before that I was going to use that street that day, the one that is closed off? I presume there is a lot of planning involved, but when you have to shut a street down for construction, this all comes through your department, is that right?

Jerry: Yes. Normally we set out about a week before and pass out flyers to neighbors that are going to be affected in our work parameters. We post signs and no parking signs about three days before construction starts and deviate traffic as needed. This is the normal process, but now with Neighborhood Councils, the community can be part of the process in advance and be part of the decision-making that will be going on.

Paul: Patricia you were pointing out that it is necessary to go through all these steps, which is understandable. When you say two or three years, I presume that some people, despite the importance of their project, get a little dissuaded because of the time involved, is that right?

Patricia: That does happen. Within that time spent, we meet back with the different community groups and try to keep them abreast of what we're involved in. Of course, design plans have to go through plan checking within Street Services. The way that we try to alleviate the community in getting discouraged in the whole process is basically by informing them of everything that we're doing and keeping them involved. It is a lengthy process and we do monthly or bimonthly meetings.

Paul: Jerry, yours is a never ending task because while you're on the construction end of it. Does your department ever catch up with all the projects?

Jerry: Never. There's always ongoing projects and of course ongoing maintenance that need to be done in all the city.

Paul: Jerry, we realize that you've got to get back to work because you've got a crew waiting out there and we thank you for coming down. We now have with us Elizabeth McClellan from the

Empowerment Congress Southeast Area Neighborhood Development Council. Welcome and thank you for joining us. Why don't we take a look at some of the projects going on in the Manchester area.

<<video clip>>

Elizabeth: What we are looking at here is an Empowerment Congress Southeast Neighborhood Development Council project that is in progress for about 4 years. We met with Vermont/Manchester Scape, which was not just Southeast Neighborhood Development Council. It was the whole community. We met and agreed upon creating and accomplishing this median together. The median will run between the eastbound and westbound lanes along Manchester between Vermont and Figueroa. What we then did was brought engineers from the Public Works, City of Los Angeles, to take out the trees and all the amenities that we would need to make this project successful. We had beautification going in the southeast area called "Let's Make Southeast Shine." We brought the idea of the median to the community and they thought it was great. They gave us more motivation and energy that we ever thought possible!

As you can see, there are two new schools here along Manchester, one is completed and the other one is in progress. The one across the street is a youth opportunity school, which happened out of the "Marching to Care" efforts of Mark Ridley-Thomas who was our former Council Member. All the Empowerment Congress' in the area were involved in the project. This particular school is an undertaking of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). It's going to be an elementary school. We were involved in the initial ground-breaking and notifying the neighborhood of it. The Southwest Neighborhood Council was at the table with LAUSD, which was an opportunity for us to work together on a project.

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Paul: Elizabeth, you and the Neighborhood Council were pretty much the power behind getting this done, isn't that right?

Elizabeth: Yes. Me, my Neighborhood Council Board Members and the community.

Paul: We heard earlier a brief outline from Patricia as to how the steps are established and how long it takes, two to three years. Has that been your experience?

Elizabeth: Pretty much except that Patricia is talking from an engineer point-of-view and I'm talking from a stakeholder or a community member point-of-view. To me it seems that the whole process has been like 5 years.

Paul: You must have gotten a little discouraged along the way, did you?

Elizabeth: I didn't have time to get discouraged because we stayed on the city officials to make sure that this project didn't fall until it cracks. Everyone worked together with us including Public Works.

Paul: How long do they project before the median will be completely finished on Manchester?

Elizabeth: We have been told it will be finished around the holidays in December of 2004.

Patricia: In December we were estimating to complete the median islands and masonry work or the cement work for the actual framework. Our project is ahead of schedule and we have finished that part of it already. We are now in the process of beginning or setting forth the steps to begin the landscaping of the median islands.

Paul: Is the landscaping a different department in the city or is it Street Services, still?

Elizabeth: No, it is still within our bureau. We have landscape architects on staff, civil engineers, and the construction crew, which Jerry was the supervisor of the crew involved in this project. It is an entire group of consulting entities for the community and we are here to service them.

Paul: There is still irrigation for the vegetation that still needs to be done, correct?

Elizabeth: Yes, we were told by Public Works that it would be coming soon because they need to break up what was already done. The Neighborhood Council is the one working with the landscape architects on picking the plants and trees that will go on the median.

Paul: They have to do some more demolition in order to get to the water supply. I presume that this will involve some new paving of the street somewhere along the lines, right?

Patricia: Yes, it is a 2 mile project. It begins at Central and goes to Vermont on Manchester. The median islands goes throughout and irrigation is placed in it. Then we move into the actual location of shrubs and trees within the median. After words we will go forth and do the enhancements to the sidewalk. Then we will locate and plant some street trees. At the end of the project, once all of the landscaping, all of the hardscape, meaning the concrete work, gets completed, then we will do the final touch of resurfacing that corridor of the street with new pavement followed by striping. The Neighborhood Council is involved in this whole process. They're the community telling Public Works what they want.

Elizabeth: While all of this is important, we also want to get to the most exciting part of this project which is the Neighborhood Council impact on getting it done and the excitement that the community is experiencing because the project is coming into the neighborhood.

Paul: I presume that as a result of the median there will be beautification as Patricia mentioned. Was everybody, particularly all the merchants, in complete agreement or did you have to do a little selling on that?

Elizabeth: Initially it seemed that everybody was in agreement because we had meetings with the community advisor council, who brings in the merchants. We didn't have opposition at that time. As time went on, however, we picked up opposition, but I think that we were successful in factoring them into the project.

Paul: It isn't just the merchants along Manchester that were affected, but also the surrounding residents all over Manchester, right? Was much input received from them? Were they consulted?

Elizabeth: Those same people who drive a car and cross the streets are the people who live in the neighborhood and yes they were consulted. They were at the meetings. We never heard any complaints during the initial development of the project.

Paul: Is there a concerted effort, since all of us one time or another run into traffic congestion caused by street renovation, to try to minimize the inconvenience to the motorists, or for that matter the pedestrians, during the structure? Did the Neighborhood Council consider this?

Patricia: Definitely. In all projects, Street Services takes into account that they have to do a great deal of traffic management. We do work, get the approval from the Department of Transportation and set aside hours where we try not to begin our work. In this particular project, it is such a large corridor that it is difficult not to create a serious impact. Manchester is a highly traveled highway in Los Angeles.

Paul: Elizabeth, even though it's not completed is it within your dreams and hopes?

Elizabeth: I think so and as the project progresses, even the people who opposed it are going to be proud that it's there. A beautiful median creates something very beautiful in a neighborhood. One thing that I was speaking to Patricia about earlier is that I've noticed that there have not been as many accidents on Manchester since the median was built.

Paul: In addition to the aesthetics, there is a seeming practical purpose of having medians.

Elizabeth: Yes, I think even a safety purpose.

Paul: A big consideration, because on the tape we saw that there are a couple of schools along Manchester, is the safety of the children. Did the Neighborhood Council consider that?

Elizabeth: The dividing line for east and west, in terms of my Neighborhood Council and the other Neighborhood Council directly next to us is at Vermont. That's the Empowerment Congress Southwest Neighborhood Development Council. We're all part of Mark Ridley-Thomas' Empowerment Congress'. At this point, they are not interested on a median going west on Manchester, but I'm sure once they see what our efforts have accomplished they'll probably be interested. I understand from Council District 8's Economic Development that this is considered a springboard for several other projects that are already funded.

Patricia: Manchester is very exciting because it does bring board several other projects that are in the process or have applied for funds. That's probably the longest way that any group has to identify that their funding process is long and sometimes the community has to hang in there and support the projects throughout, as Elizabeth has said. It seems to her like it's been five years or more because she is a resident of that area. I've been involved in it for about 3 years and it's exciting. It has started other community groups into wanting to do the same type of improvements.

Paul: There is an obvious coordination between the departments, even though they are all under the banner of the City of Los Angeles. How is Public Works and the Bureau of Street Services doing to change the manner in which they conduct business?

Patricia: Bureau of Street Services and other city agencies are trying to get to all the projects that the Neighborhood Councils want and these projects are reflecting what the community wants. There are several needs that the community comes forth with in every project and it's something that's a work in progress.

Paul: To all of those who are listening out there and who have some idea of a project in their neighborhood is this something that involves a lot of planning, so they should start right away right?

Patricia: My word of advice is don't get discouraged! Hang in there! There's plenty of funding in the future that may arise and you never know when or when. There are different funding groups of all sorts, and you have to be patient and not give up hope. The Neighborhood Councils, however, are an excellent resource because they are the ones who will be doing the strategic planning for improvements and beautifications like the median on Manchester.

Paul: Elizabeth, as the wise philosopher says, "nothing's a problem that can be solved by money." Where is the funding coming from? Does the Neighborhood Council have access to money?

Elizabeth: 1.1 million dollars came from MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) and the pro-match, \$300,000, came from the city. The project has called for now 1.4 million dollars.

Paul: Patricia, when you say the money is there, you mean it isn't necessarily already allocated. It's dependent on what the request is as to when we are going to get it.

Patricia: Right. There are several projects that may be on hold at the present time because of the state. It will change and I think community groups should not get discouraged from gathering their residents and finding out what their check list should include because these projects usually take, like I mentioned, 3 years to materialize. It takes a great effort to solicit the support of the residents and to get them involved enough to get springboard a project into action.

Elizabeth: Yes, I think that this project is probably one of its kind in that area. It didn't come about because one of us was holding a banner and said let's fund this project. It came about because the Neighborhood Council thought that it they could do a beautification or improvement in the area and went to the city official, Council Member Mark Ridley-Thomas. He bought into it and began to look for the funding. As Patricia told us this morning, DOT was the first engine that he acquired. The actual funding came through the MTA because of the fact that Manchester is a transient area and because there is a bus there where many people ride it. MTA jumped at the idea to make that more pedestrian friendly.

Patricia: This project emphasizes on just doing that. We are trying to beautify that corridor so that pedestrians are more inclined to use public transportation. By providing more shade, by the street trees that will be going in and the median islands, also have an affect in that corridor. Studies have shown that by putting median islands and putting landscaping tends to calm traffic down. For the school kids and residents is kind of a win-win project.

Paul: With the hope that the money is there because there is so much allocated within the various budgets, it's a matter of convincing the decision-makers in City Hall who allocate that money as to the importance of your particular project, wherever your neighborhood is throughout the City of Los Angeles. Then the leg work begins once you find that the money is available.

Elizabeth: There has been a conservative effort on the part of this Neighborhood Council to hang in there with city officials and even Public Works. The Neighborhood Council and I speak on behalf of all Neighborhood Councils do have the power to influence the decision-makers.

Neighborhood Councils are just doing it at a grass-roots effort. We wrote letters, everywhere I saw the President Valerie Shaw of the Board of Public Works, I reminded her that the project was there, and every time I saw a City Council Member that was involved, I let them know about the project in Manchester. I think we worried people so much that they had to do something. I would tell Neighborhood Councils or any organization that want to do an improvement of that sort in their neighborhood to be consistent and persistent.

Patricia: We should also add that this project for 1.4 million on Manchester is a rather small budget for the project. Although we're starting the project there are going to be amenities that get implemented even after our funding is allocated and implemented because the budget the project received is really not covering all of the items that the area is getting.

Elizabeth: We had a meeting about a month ago with Leslie Shields from Public Works and David Roberts who is the Economic Development Liaison for Council District 8 and held him to saying that they will secure the money that we need to complete this project. As long as you have the Neighborhood Council on your side, they will be watched carefully.

Paul: Speaking of funding, Nancy as always is right on cue with the tab. We really appreciate you being here today. We are out of time, but we want to thank our guests Elizabeth McClellan from the Empowerment Southeast Area Neighborhood Development Council and Patricia Airiza from the City of Los Angeles Public Works Bureau of Street Services. If you have any questions or topics that you like to see covered in future shows, email your comments to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at www.lacityneighborhoods.com or you can call toll-free 866-LAHELPS and for more information on any City service just call 3-1-1. That's 3-1-1, your one call to City Hall. For everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, I'm Paul Napier.