

Van Nuys Boulevard

Los Angeles, California

Leveraging Existing Assets to Engage the Community



Lessons Learned

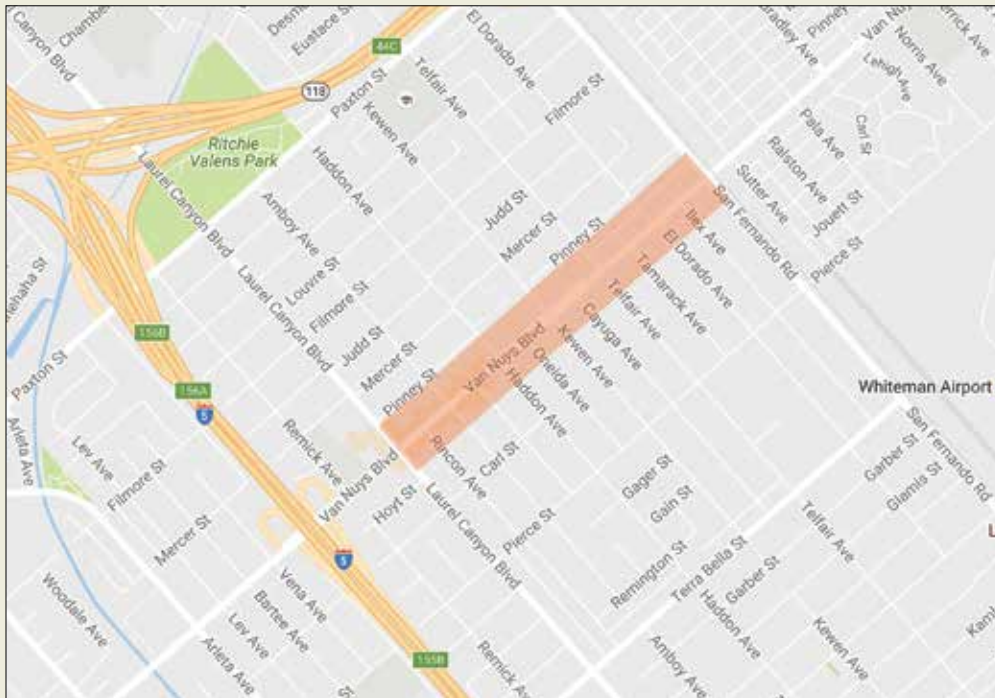
- » Capitalize on assets and existing identity, and leverage those assets to draw visitors to the corridor.
- » Demonstrate changes to the corridor, whenever possible, through temporary infrastructure improvements and pop-up events; then gauge community response and achieve buy-in from residents and business owners before more permanent improvements are made.

Van Nuys Boulevard in Los Angeles spans the central San Fernando Valley, running about ten miles through communities of varying demographics. ULI Los Angeles and a group of local stakeholders chose to focus on the 0.75-mile stretch of Van Nuys that runs through the heart of the Pacoima neighborhood. Located 30 minutes north of downtown Los Angeles, Pacoima is a vibrant and diverse community that also has some of the city's highest poverty and crime rates and poorest health outcomes. The neighborhood exhibits some of the city's highest concentrations of childhood obesity, diabetes mortality, and stroke. Pacoima is a high-needs neighborhood, with an average per capita yearly income of \$13,180 (one of the lowest in the city) and an average median household income well below that of the city. More than one in five Pacoima residents falls

under the federal poverty limit, and one in ten working-age adults in Pacoima are unemployed.

The corridor is characterized by a wide automobile-oriented road, small-scale commercial establishments, inadequate pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and adjacent single-family homes. The corridor also contains unique cultural elements, including colorful murals and small businesses that cater to the surrounding Latino community. Melani Smith, a Los Angeles-based urban planner and chair of the local leadership group, described it this way: "Van Nuys is an underperforming area in Los Angeles that at the same time has enormous potential in the power of its engaged community, lively arts scene, and local entrepreneurial spirit."

Van Nuys Boulevard's unique cultural resources and active local organizations provide a strong



The Van Nuys Boulevard corridor area (shaded) and surroundings. (Google Maps)

Quick Facts

- » **Length of Study Section:** 0.75 miles
- » **Average Number of Lanes:** 5 lanes of traffic
- » **Average Posted Vehicle Speed:** 35 mph
- » **Available Transit Options:** Bus
- » **Bike Lanes:** 0 miles
- » **Sidewalks:** 100 percent of the corridor has sidewalks on both sides, but there is a lack of pedestrian amenities, such as benches.
- » **Income Data:** Per capita income of \$13,180; 20 percent of Pacoima residents are under the federal poverty limit; 10 percent are unemployed.
- » **Health Issues:** High levels of childhood obesity, diabetes mortality, and stroke in adjacent neighborhoods.
- » **Land Use:** Primarily fast-food restaurants, strip malls, and automobile repair shops; there are no parks or open spaces in the corridor.
- » **Distinguishing Features:** Selected as a corridor for the LA Great Streets Initiative, the corridor has numerous murals by local artists and is a possible corridor for a future bus rapid transit (BRT) or light-rail transit route.

OPPOSITE: Unique elements, including colorful murals, contribute to the cultural character of the corridor. (Rosa Ruvalcaba/flickr)

foundation for enhancing the economic, environmental, and physical health of the community. The street has been identified as one of the 15 “Great Streets” segments being championed throughout the city of Los Angeles by Mayor Eric Garcetti’s office, and it is being considered for the route of a new Metro bus rapid transit (BRT) or light-rail line, which would enhance connectivity between the neighborhood and the surrounding area. In addition, a new neighborhood “City Hall” and entrepreneur center have laid the foundation for a transformation rooted in community needs and desires.

Local Work for Change

In the summer of 2015, Van Nuys Boulevard’s local leadership group held a stakeholder workshop that brought together the arts, health, business, social service, education, public sector employees, and community stakeholders who had not been connected previously. Participants presented information about the numerous planning efforts for the area, and the group was able to establish a foundation of common understanding around the need to improve the health of those who rely on Van Nuys Boulevard. “Bringing ULIs ‘healthy places’ and ‘healthy corridor’ lenses to a place like this led us to bring a range of stakeholders to the table that had not collaborated together previously,” Smith noted.

During the workshop, the local leadership group presented summaries of past plans for the area and tied them together as an overall wish list for the neighborhood. Items on the list included pedestrian- and bike-friendly amenities and residents’ desires to turn Van Nuys into a quieter, cleaner, and safer corridor. In an interactive discussion, the stakeholders considered how a healthy corridor is defined, what elements currently exist, and what elements are needed along Van Nuys. The group also discussed ideas for a pilot project along Van Nuys that would demonstrate its potential as a healthy corridor, and the group considered who should be involved in that project.

Key issues that emerged during the workshop included the need to improve the perception and reality of safety (including traffic, crime, and gang activity), encourage education and training tied to the arts and culture scene, find new uses to improve economic and public health, and engage all populations and ages in decisions that affect the corridor.

Another big challenge in this area is housing; numerous single-family houses have been illegally converted into multifamily dwellings, thus creating extremely dense and potentially dangerous living conditions. The Los Angeles City Council District office intends to maintain the affordability of the area while converting the illegal conversions into formalized—and safe—residential options that meet building codes.



Recommendations

The local workshop helped bring area stakeholders together to discuss current and potential issues concerning Van Nuys Boulevard. It also set the stage and identified study questions for the national study visit held in February 2016.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

- » In an economically and environmentally challenged but culturally rich area such as Pacoima, what opportunities exist for improving the health and economic well-being of the community, whether through providing jobs, services, or goods?
- » How can Van Nuys Boulevard property owners take advantage of the imminent opportunity presented by a proposed new transit line and other investments in the corridor to develop businesses now and prevent displacement in the future?

The national experts reviewed the assets and challenges of Van Nuys Boulevard. Assets include a high percentage of homeownership in the area, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a corridor that has continuous sidewalks with buildings adjacent to the road rather than set back from it. Conversely, a clearly automobile-dominated street with high traffic speeds and few pedestrian and bike amenities creates a challenging environment. A lack of business diversity, as well as a lack of businesses that remain open after 5:00 p.m., creates challenges to serving daily community needs. In addition, a lack of policies or regulations to support the creation of safe accessory dwelling units has contributed to the current housing concerns.

To emphasize the existing assets, the participants created a three-pronged value structure for a healthy Van Nuys Boulevard that highlights

the strong arts and culture in the community, the opportunity for change, and the diversity of the area. The team provided recommendations in three overarching categories: community health and development, economic development, and marketing strategies focused on getting people to the boulevard. Those categories framed specific recommendations, including ideas for introducing programming, expanding opportunities for local businesses through training and an organizational structure, and embracing social media and the arts to bring people to the corridor.

Key recommendations included the following:

PLACEMAKING AND PROGRAMMING: Leverage social connectedness through strategies including enhancing active transportation safety, convenience, and aesthetics; producing regular marquee events and programming, such as a chalk-art street mural festival that celebrates Pacoima's unique and diverse culture; cultivating a "Pacoima Week" that celebrates local culture, community, and food; participating in CicLAvia or other Great Streets events that are supported by the mayor's office and that occur along Van Nuys; and creating places for the community to gather outdoors.

PUBLIC SAFETY: Improve the perception of safety in the area by facilitating agreements among businesses to stay open later; by promoting family-friendly and active spaces, businesses, and activities; and by working with the local library to become even further involved with the community.

HOUSING: Encourage healthy housing in Pacoima by allowing and streamlining the permitting process for multiple-family units.

HEALTHY FOOD: Increase access to healthy food by creating a location on the corridor where residents can sell neighborhood produce on a regular



basis; by identifying an existing restaurant in the San Fernando Valley and developing tools to encourage it to locate in Pacoima; and by enhancing education around food growing, production, and safety.

LOCAL BUSINESSES: Build up the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Van Nuys by expanding business development opportunities, promoting and featuring local businesses, and providing training and mentorship opportunities to local business owners.

MARKETING AND IDENTITY: Leverage opportunities, including a logo for the “Celebrate Pacoima” tagline; embrace hashtags like #celebratepacoima and #muralmile; invest in street-lamp banners to highlight the corridor; and look at new events including a “Pacoima at Night” night market and evening art walks. Define a “heart of Pacoima” through street and infrastructure transformation and a murals program that highlights the history of Pacoima.

The national study group participants recommended that the local team and stakeholders prioritize the following: demonstrate street infrastructure transformation on one section of Van Nuys Boulevard, use city resources to create a city liaison position to work with local businesses, and position Pacoima City Hall as a catalyst for change by using the space for programs and events.

Next Steps

At the inception of the Healthy Corridors project in early 2015, the ULI Los Angeles staff and members started working with Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti’s office, 7th District councilmember Felipe Fuentes and his staff, and local stakeholders to envision how Van Nuys Boulevard could be improved in health-promoting ways.

Through research and conversations with local organizations and public officials, the team recognized very early in the project that for many years the community and consultant teams had offered many great ideas for making Pacoima a healthier place to live. Those ideas ranged from encouraging physical activity and creating safer environments to improving access to healthy food. With such ideas in mind, the local leadership group planned a demonstration project that would allow community members to see, feel, and experience what a healthier Van Nuys Boulevard could be.

On March 6, 2016, Van Nuys Boulevard was closed to automobiles as part of CicLAvia, a recurring open-streets event that catalyzes good health, active transportation, and lively public spaces. ULI Los Angeles worked with partners and stakeholders in Pacoima to plan the Pacoima Health Zone—a demonstration project modeling



the potential long-term changes that would result from creating a more vibrant, healthy, and people-friendly Van Nuys Boulevard.

ULI Los Angeles and members constructed pop-up streetscape elements, including a temporary parklet and curb extensions. Other area partners provided information, demonstrations, and interactive exercises intended to create healthier people and places. The purpose of the Health Zone was not only to show what a healthy corridor—and a healthy Pacoima—could look like but also to help build a constituency for and relationships to support greater access to health resources.

Along this section of Van Nuys, a lane reduction to be completed by the end of 2016 will improve the safety and walkability of the corridor. The local leadership group is working on enhancing the arts and culture focus of the corridor, and the group continues to work with community partners to support the partners’ work in Pacoima. The group is also developing a plan to implement national study visit recommendations, including the recommendation to continue community programs and local business enhancement and retention and the recommendation to identify funding sources.

Through those efforts, progress is underway to transform Van Nuys Boulevard into a healthier, more complete street.

OPPOSITE TOP: During the national study visit, experts toured Van Nuys Boulevard and the surrounding neighborhoods. (Sara Hammerschmidt)

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: A wide, automobile-oriented road prevents safe walking and biking along and across Van Nuys Boulevard. (Jonathan Nettler)

TOP: The Pacoima Health Zone included information booths, pop-up infrastructure projects, healthy living demonstrations, and interactive exercises. (ULI Los Angeles)

ABOVE: A temporary parklet constructed during CicLAvia served to illustrate what more permanent street improvements could look like. (ULI Los Angeles)