

Advocating for Safety and Health: Vacaville's REACH Youth Coalition and the City of Vacaville's General Plan Update

Increasing and incorporating youth engagement, participation and voice to help communities take action to create positive opportunities for youth.

Background

The City of Vacaville has a long history of collaborating on issues concerning the youth in their community. In November 1991, community leaders and citizens who were concerned about youth issues came together to share information and resources. They established the Vacaville Youth Roundtable (YRT), including representatives from the City of Vacaville, Vacaville Unified School District, Travis Unified School District, County government, local businesses, churches, youth-serving organizations and community health organizations. These organizations served as a clearinghouse of information and resources, as well as a community forum for discussing youth issues and a 'think tank' for research and program development.



Vacaville teens volunteer and clean up local trails.

As this collaborative work continued, Vacaville saw a need for building youth voice, participation and leadership in the community. The community leaders recognized that while having community stakeholders connect, coordinate and collaborate to better serve youth is important; incorporating youth voice and leadership into the work would have an even greater impact. In 2008, the Sierra Health Foundation was looking for a city to establish their next REACH youth coalition focusing on increasing youth participation in building healthy communities. They identified Vacaville because of its rich history of collaboration on youth issues and they reached out to the Vacaville Youth Roundtable. The Youth Roundtable saw alignment and opportunity in working with the Sierra Health Foundation to get their youth active in the community and working on issues that matter to them.

The Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition, a program of the Vacaville Police Department's Youth Services Section, became a sub-committee of the Vacaville Youth Roundtable and a mechanism through which they increased youth participation in quality programs. They provided opportunities for youth to develop

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leadership skills while contributing to their communities, and helped communities take action to create positive opportunities for youth.

Identifying the Problem

The REACH Youth Coalition changed the process for identifying gaps and problems in the community. Instead of adults identifying problems from their perspective, the youth now had the opportunity to engage in their community. The REACH Youth Coalition worked with Vacaville Unified School District to conduct surveys of middle school youth on what they saw in their communities. Through this process the coalition discovered that bike trail safety was a critical problem in their community and identified the Rocky Hill Trail, often referred to as the “ghetto” trail, as a specific problem that needed to be addressed. This was a dangerous and unsafe path, littered with garbage, broken bottles and glass and often used needles and condoms. The youth had seen so many other beautiful trails in Vacaville and wondered why the Rocky Hill Trail had been left behind. Walking and biking was a primary mode of transportation for many families and students in the area and this path provided critical connections between home, schools, jobs and child care.

The youth concluded that improving this path was essential to the health and safety of the community and that they could play a role in addressing this need. They wanted to transform this trail into a place where the community can feel safe. In an effort to advocate for positive changes in their neighborhood, the Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition stepped forward to lead for change.

The City of Vacaville General Plan

REACH members soon discovered it takes significant time and effort to initiate change in the community. They started their work by getting the community involved, engaged and aware by inviting local community members, organizations, churches and agencies to come out and help with bike trail clean up. To increase awareness, they decided to create a video depicting what was going on with the trail.

At the same time, the City of Vacaville was preparing to revise the General Plan — the principal policy and planning document for guiding future conservation, enhancement and development in the city. The city manager, city planner and their staff were looking for ways to build outreach to the broader community and gather input from citizens to include in the General Plan update. Through this process, city staff heard the REACH presentation and video and suggested that the youth advocate for the addition of the trail in the General Plan, where it could be recognized as an official City of Vacaville bike trail, a critical first step to be considered for future funding, planning and improvements. In 2013, the youth presented their video, *The Rocky Hill Trail: On a Path of Transformation*, to the city council.

The success of their presentation to the city council was a huge milestone in their work, but it was only just the beginning. In order to incorporate the trail in the General Plan, the youth had several steps to take. The youth attended all General Plan meetings so their voice would be heard. At every meeting over two years, REACH members spoke of the need to address this problem, why the trail was necessary for residents and made recommendations for improvements. One REACH member, Ana Zanabria, spoke at a General Plan meeting in October 2014:

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"I have been living near the Rocky Hill area since I was 4 years old. Living near the trail, I witnessed the path become impossible to walk through without feeling uneasy inside because of all the stories I have heard about people being assaulted and of people using the trail to participate in illegal activities like drugs, tobacco and alcohol use. A few years ago, my uncle was walking through the trail after work when he was assaulted and had his wallet stolen. Due to the conditions of the trail and the fact that it is not a recognized bike trail it attracts crime and abusive activities. Even though the trail is unsafe, community members continue to use it out of need."

REACH members continued to mobilize the community as well by conducting petitions, writing and requesting letters of support to be submitted to the General Plan and speaking with area residents about safety so that everyone understood what they were doing and what was going on.

The next significant achievement came in August 2015 when the General Plan was approved and the Rocky Hill Trail was included as an official bike trail. Community groups started building a community garden and gazebo as part of the trail and some portions began to get paved. As of September 2016, work still continues as additional funding needs to be secured as each section of the trail undergoes improvements.



Teens with Vacaville's Youth REACH Coalition volunteer in the community.

Assets and Opportunities

A long history of collaboration among youth-serving agencies, departments and organizations built a solid foundation for the creation of the Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition and the significant impact of its work. For example, their partnership with the Sierra Health Foundation enabled the city to maximize the opportunity to strengthen the connection between youth and the community. Strong partnerships were also an important asset to the youth as they set to work identifying needs and implementing solutions. The Boys and Girls Club, Fathers House and other community organizations located along the trail regularly communicate and partner with REACH and the youth members. These partners work together on clean up days to benefit the trail and in obtaining grant funds for the trail's development. Additionally, REACH members collaborated with city community services staff members to advocate for the addition of the Rocky Hill Trail in the General Plan. Department staff members kept youth up-to-date

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on important deadlines and meetings and built relationships with the young advocates. REACH members continued to partner with the Vacaville Community Services Department to host a naming meeting for the trail. Several residents attended to brainstorm the following names for the trail: The Rocky Hill Trial, Nuestro Camino and El Caminito. After both the Community Services Naming Committee and Community Services Planning Division approved the names, the official name given to the trail was the Rocky Hill Trail, formally approved by Vacaville City Council late in 2016.

In addition, the Children’s Network of Solano County invited the youth to attend their policy forum, which provided the opportunity to recognize their leadership and work on the Rocky Hill Trail. Elected officials from the Vacaville City Council and Solano County Board of Supervisors became strong partners. The elected officials assisted with applications for grant funding and spoke on behalf of the project when opportunities arose.

Key Lessons for Local Government on Collaboration

Authentic youth engagement and participation take time. Lessons learned from the experience of the City of Vacaville and the Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition include:

- **Encourage community involvement in planning processes.** Taking the time on the front end to educate city staff on why it’s important and why it’s a priority to the city is a critical first step. Community members and agency staff alike may need time and support to understand how engaging with each other will help them achieve their goals and shared vision.
- **Help government staff change their perceptions of what is possible.** Government is often known for taking the path of least resistance. However, that mindset can close doors to better options that will benefit the community over the long term.
- **Be open, honest and transparent with communication and find ways for them to connect beyond the specific program.** Just as with adults, focusing efforts on keeping individual youth engaged over time is critical. Working within local government systems and processes takes time and often includes behind the scenes work that isn’t always visible. Additionally, because of the long processes, some youth who might start engagement in a project at age 13 or 14 will have moved on to college or careers before they see the successes of their hard work. Being aware of these challenges and its impact on the engagement of youth is important. Finding ways to ensure youth are making the most decisions possible and they are driving the focus of the work on areas that are important to them is critical to ongoing engagement.
- **It takes time to check in individually with each youth regularly and see how things are going, but that effort will have significant impact on their engagement and success over the long term.** The Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition included a diverse group of youth — some were referred by the police department’s diversion program, were in need of completing community service hours, heard about it on their own or came with a friend. Building relationships with each youth one-on-one is a critical piece to their long term engagement. Creating a safe space that focuses on team building, fostering relationships and making connections is important. Working closely with your agency’s youth services department, family resource centers and other youth-serving organizations in the community to coordinate check-ins and connections with the youth is vital.

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- **Don't expect the partnership or relationship to continue seamlessly — put in the effort to build trust and connection before pushing forward with collaborative work.** Relationships are key to developing and sustaining partnerships and collaboration. The challenge with established partnerships comes when new staff members arrive and/or there is significant turn-around with staff in partner agencies. It's important to take the time to establish new relationships with the new staff, bring them up to speed on the collaborative work and make sure it continues as a two-way street.

Outcomes and Future Goals

The Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition and the City of Vacaville continue to work on the improvement of the Rocky Hill Trail. As of September 2016, the City of Vacaville is currently working towards paving the trail — with multiple letters of support from the youth and their partners, the engineering staff put funding into the Capital Improvement Budget and applied for approval for the paved path. While REACH's vision is for a trail with amenities that include more than just pavement, they understand it will take time and several attempts to improve the trail in a way that community residents can take ownership of it. Therefore, REACH members continue to be invested in the trail and attend any meetings where the design of the trail will be discussed. They continue to be in touch with the public works and planning departments to ensure that they are kept aware of upcoming meetings. In the meantime, REACH members continue to work on some of their other coalition strategies such as alcohol, tobacco and drug prevention, and a Vacaville youth webpage.

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RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE:

City of Vacaville General Plan: www.cityofvacaville.com/index.aspx?page=486

Vacaville REACH Coalition: www.ci.vacaville.ca.us/index.aspx?page=465

Rocky Hill Trail Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jm81d0tqmEc