



Like many neighborhoods in California's Central Valley, the Modesto Airport Neighborhood is no stranger to the need for safe routes to school. But while the city of Modesto and Stanislaus County have policies and plans in place that provide guidance for supporting bicycle and pedestrian needs, there has never been a formal Safe Routes to School program or framework established in the city. As a result, some neighborhoods and sections of Modesto were getting prioritized over others.

The Modesto Airport Neighborhood is one such community that had not historically received much in the way of Safe Routes to School investment and attention. The Airport Neighborhood is a low-income community where public transportation is very limited. Most students get to school by walking or are dropped off by car. However, high traffic speeds and a lack of enforcement makes active transportation feel unsafe, and many parents are hesitant to let their children walk or bike to school.



With support from Kaiser Permanente, the Safe Routes Partnership has a regional policy manager, Marty Martinez, who works with disadvantaged communities in California's Central Valley. As part of this work, Marty holds regular stakeholder meetings with different communities in the Central Valley in order to meet advocates and learn about the issues. In 2017 and 2018, Marty's advocacy work had connected him with a community advocate working with the Tuolumne River Trust, Edgar Garibay, who was active in the collaborative working to improve mobility options in the Modesto Airport Neighborhood.

A lot of groundwork had been done in the neighborhood previously, with the formation of a walking school bus at Orville Wright Elementary School, and the formation of a neighborhood collaborative, chaired by the school and the Tuolumne River Trust, but the community still had many unaddressed safety and infrastructure needs. When the Safe Routes Partnership launched the Safe Routes Launch program, which offers free technical assistance to communities in California seeking to develop a comprehensive and sustainable Safe Routes to School

program, Marty knew it would be the perfect way to help the neighborhood. Marty pitched the Safe Routes Launch program to the neighborhood collaborative and helped them develop a competitive application for the program in the spring of 2018. Modesto was chosen as one of the five communities that received the award in 2018.

Marty then teamed up with the National Partnership's senior technical assistance and consulting manager, Michelle Lieberman, to kick off the Safe Routes Launch program with the Tuolumne River Trust, Catholic Charities Diocese of Stockton, Orville Wright Elementary, City of Modesto, and Stanislaus County. One of the first actions they took was to host a Safe Routes Launch workshop in which representatives from the City, County, Orville Wright Elementary, community organizations, and residents learned about Safe Routes to School. Participants were able to discuss strategies for developing a robust, comprehensive program in the Modesto Airport Neighborhood.

As part of the workshop, Marty led several walk audits with stakeholders around the neighborhood. “The representation and attendance at the workshop was amazing, and the walk audits benefited from having so many community perspectives,” said Marty. The walk audit documented current conditions around Orville Wright Elementary, including lack of sidewalks, drainage, high traffic speeds, wide streets, and a lack of bicycle facilities.

Another priority that emerged from the workshop was the desire to strengthen the walking school bus program at Orville Wright. Parents expressed that they would feel more comfortable letting their children walk to school if they knew they were in a group with peers and adult chaperones, and a walking school bus would help significantly increase the rates of walking to school. Based on workshop feedback, Marty and Michelle crafted a Safe Routes to School Action Plan that synthesized community members’ desires alongside the Safe Routes Partnership’s knowledge and best practices from around the country.

After the Action Plan was developed, Edgar and Marty presented the plan at several coalitions and city and county meetings to familiarize them with the neighborhood’s needs and to gain local government support. Marty presented to staff from the Modesto Planning Department who were working on the general plan, as well as to the city council. Marty joined a sign-on letter urging for changes to the general plan, including pushing for environmental justice changes that will ensure that communities like the Airport Neighborhood won’t get overlooked in the future.

In the fall of 2018, Marty, along with California Walks, provided technical assistance to help the County of Stanislaus write a competitive application for the California Active Transportation Program (ATP) based on the needs outlined in the Safe Routes to School Action Plan. They ultimately secured \$6.1 million to fund new sidewalks and bicycle paths for the Modesto Airport Neighborhood. Only 61 projects out of 554 applications were funded during the ATP Cycle 4, so the Airport Neighborhood’s award speaks to the degree



of the community’s needs, the community input from the Safe Routes Launch program, and the quality of their application.

“Working with the Airport Neighborhood Collaborative during the Safe Routes Launch project created the right synergy to develop a competitive ATP application,” said Marty. “These funds will help the Airport Neighborhood significantly improve conditions for walking and biking to Orville Wright Elementary, and eventually to all schools in the Modesto area.”

Marty continues to be involved in improving equity and mobility options in the Modesto area through providing input on the Non-Motorized Transportation Plan in Stanislaus County and the Modesto General Plan. The combination of the new Safe Routes to School initiatives at Orville Wright Elementary, new policy creation opportunities at the City and County, and strong community support mean that many important pieces are in place for a successful Safe Routes to School effort. By implementing the activities set out in the Safe Routes Launch Action Plan over the next five years, the Airport Neighborhood is poised to build a strong and sustainable Safe Routes to School program and see healthier students and residents, reduced congestion, and a more livable and safer community.