

Safer Streets, Sidewalks and Trails

Success Stories: Tulare's Santa Fe Trail



courtesy of LGC

- **Introduction**

Tulare is a city of approximately 50,000 located in the Central San Joaquin Valley. The city is situated amidst some of the most productive farmland in the world, and agriculture is the lifeblood of the local economy. The railroad has always been a critical form of transportation in Tulare, making it possible for locally grown products to be distributed efficiently to a variety of major markets. The city was founded by the Southern Pacific Railroad, and a number of railroad companies have linked to the Tulare throughout its history. Now the city's rail infrastructure is utilized in a new way; a rails-to-trails project has transformed an abandoned line into a popular path for pedestrians and cyclists.

- **Goal**

The city was approached by the Tulare Valley Railroad with an offer to transfer ownership of a rail line, then in a state of interim abandonment, to the city at no cost. City staff was at first skeptical, but over the course of several years, they spent time learning about rails-to-trails projects, determined that there were no environmental issues with the property, and ultimately agreed to transfer ownership. The goal was to take this piece of property, previously considered to have no value and viewed by many as an eyesore, and transform it into a transportation corridor for pedestrians and cyclists that the people of Tulare would use and appreciate.

- **Approach**

The rail line acquisition process was completed by 1997. There were minimal ownership and encroachment issues during acquisition, but as the process moved forward, the city recognized that it would be critical for the adjacent land owners be involved in the planning process if the project was to be a success. Residents of Tulare were invited to participate in a series of public meetings, with extra

outreach extended to residents living along the trail corridor. A landscape architecture firm, Purkiss-Rose, was hired to lead the meetings over the course of a year in which the residents and staff developed a Master Plan for the trail.

The rail line traveled through agricultural land, city property, and Tulare's downtown. It was recognized by residents that, because of its location, it would be convenient for some people to use to get to work, school, or shopping. In addition to being a recreation resource, it was also seen as a great opportunity to tie together different elements of the city.

The project, from acquisition to completion, required an outlay of more than \$3 million. The Recreation, Parks and Library Department worked hard to secure a wide variety of grant funding and was quite successful. The largest sources were \$1,393,000 in Congestion, Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ) funding, and \$832,000 from Transportation Enhancements Programs. Other funding sources included the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, State Recreation Bond Act funds, a Millennium Tree grant, Community Development Block Grants, and local fundraising. In addition, the city contributed \$600,000 from its general fund. To provide a perspective, the city's 2003/04 total budget, including redevelopment, was \$65 million.

Tulare used volunteers for some of the labor, which helped reduce expenses. Several hundred residents donated time over the course of a few weekends, generally volunteering a few hours apiece. Much of the volunteer work was related to landscaping, including planting trees. Local service clubs and youth groups made up many of the volunteers.

- **Progress**

The physical work started in 2000 and was completed in 2004. Recreation, Parks and Library Director Bill Wagenhalls feels fortunate that the grant money came together in a short period of time, allowing the work to be completed relatively quickly. Operational costs have been budgeted into the city's park maintenance budget.

The Santa Fe trail currently spans more than five miles, with the city looking at opportunities to connect it to neighboring Visalia. The asphalt path is twelve feet wide, with an adjacent horse trail. Mr. Wagenhalls reports that the trail is heavily used at all times of the day. There is even an early morning demand, so the city turns on the lights at 5:00 a.m. During the day, many children use the trail to get to school, with almost 10 schools within a half mile of the trail.

- **Lessons Learned**

The biggest challenges the project encountered were concerns from adjacent land owners during the design process. Property owners were initially apprehensive about the prospect of a multi-use path running along their backyards, due to

concerns about encroachment on their property. The city was flexible and worked with individual owners to understand their concerns. By making minor design changes, including installing more or fewer benches, not lighting a particular spot, and building walls for privacy, the city was able to address the adjacent owners' issues.

Land owners also expressed concerned that they were losing vehicle access to the rear of their property. Ultimately, owners were granted vehicle access to the trail through locked access points. Owners have a key which allows them to bring their vehicles onto park property, travel along areas designed to handle the vehicles, and onto their property. Some trees had to be relocated to accommodate this, but overall the impact was minimal and did not alter the trail location. Thanks to a collaborative effort, the owner's concerns were addressed and Tulare built its popular Santa Fe Trail.

Author/Source

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