

Environmental Justice Success Stories

From the James Cary Smith Community Grant Program

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District (Air District)'s James Cary Smith Community Grant Program supports community-based organizations that build local capacity for environmental justice work. The 2022-2025 grant cycle funded 33 organizations - click below to explore several transformational projects and their impacts.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHTS – 2024

[Acterra](#)

Multilingual community meals build knowledge and resources around electric vehicles for low-income households in Bay Point, Pittsburg, and San José through the Karl Knapp GoEV Program.

[Bike East Bay](#)

High school students advocate for safe biking infrastructure in Pittsburg and Concord through the Transportation & Environmental Justice Club.

[Breathe California](#)

Emerging community leaders in San José engage individuals of all ages in air quality advocacy through their Community Action for Increasing Health Equity Program.

[BrightAction Communities](#)

Spanish-speaking community leaders in San José create more resilient, connected, and equitable neighborhoods through interactive air quality workshops.

[Latinos United for a New America](#)

Community leaders in East San José lead civic engagement efforts for environmental justice through an Environmental Justice Academy and a Promotores program.

[San Francisco Transit Riders](#)

Underserved San Francisco neighborhoods push for public transit equity through the Transit Justice Coalition.

[Strategic Energy Innovations](#)

Middle and high school students across the Bay Area design and execute sustainability action campaigns through the Energize Schools Program.

[Tri-Valley Air Quality Climate Alliance](#)

Activists and college interns implement air quality outreach activities and local advocacy campaigns to improve community health in Dublin, Livermore, Pleasanton, and San Ramon.



Acterra: Karl Knapp GoEV Program

James Cary Smith Community Grant: Grantee Spotlight

Bay Area Air Quality Management District



James Cary Smith Community Grant

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District's ("Air District") [James Cary Smith Community Grant Program](#) provides grants to community groups, neighborhood associations, and nonprofit organizations to uplift local efforts for capacity building in environmental justice work. Funds support community-based programs that address air quality and reduce exposure to air pollution by fostering authentic community participation in planning activities.

Acterra

Electric vehicles are an important tool for reducing a household's carbon footprint and improving air quality. However, many people lack the financial resources to purchase a new electric vehicle, and renters often don't have access to charging outlets. [Bay Area organization Acterra: Action for a Healthy Planet \(Acterra\) works to support the increased adoption of electric vehicles by low-income households in Bay Point, Pittsburg, and San José](#), with a focus on the communities most impacted by poor air quality. Acterra received James Cary Smith Community Grant funds for the Karl Knapp GoEV Program for 2022-2025 to conduct an outreach campaign designed to bring together communities and government agencies to share resources around electric vehicles.

Karl Knapp GoEV Program

Community Dinners for Clean Transportation

The [Karl Knapp GoEV Program](#) hosts bi-annual *Community Dinners for Clean Transportation* in Pittsburg and San José with an average of 50 attendees per dinner. Acterra, in partnership with Cool the Earth, facilitates an accessible and engaging event by providing dinner, childcare, a presentation, and interactive activities. By providing opportunities for community members to connect with each other while learning about the impact of transportation on air quality, Acterra motivates participants to sustain community participation in air quality efforts. As Irvin Rivero, E-Mobility Associate at Acterra, emphasized: *"If it's the whole community making that change or pledging that they're going to make their next car an electric vehicle, it can create a big impact."* By increasing the accessibility of electric vehicles to more people, the GoEV Program can help improve the air quality of an entire neighborhood or city.





Financial Incentives Clinics

Acterra hosts multilingual *Financial Incentives Clinics* on a quarterly basis with an average of 40 attendees per clinic. These clinics showcase the benefits of electric vehicles from a variety of angles and provide participants tangible next steps to access funding for electric vehicles. During a Fall 2023 clinic offered in English with Spanish and Chinese live interpretation, presenters highlighted benefits to the environment that electric vehicles provide, as well as health improvements for individuals. Irvin Rivero of Acterra shared specific details on the types of electric cars eligible for incentives and gave a full calculation of the cost of a car after rebates. He provided clear application timelines and offered consultations to interested attendees. Acterra's *Financial Incentives*

Clinics are an important component of making electric vehicles more accessible for Bay Area communities.

Partnerships & Collaboration

Recent Air District initiatives to strengthen air quality regulations and reduce emissions have increased community awareness around air quality generally, an important foundation for Acterra to expand Bay Area residents' knowledge of air quality to understand the impact of transportation and the benefits of electric vehicles. Additionally, [the Air District's Clean Cars for All](#) program is an important resource for low-income community members to access and afford electric vehicles, a resource which Acterra has promoted in their Financial Incentives Clinics to benefit community members.

Acterra hopes to partner further with the Air District on informing policies around transportation, such as increasing charging infrastructure to enable a just transition to electric vehicles.

Looking Ahead

Acterra has leveraged successes from the James Cary Smith grant to receive a Community Air Grant from the California Air Resources Board, and to apply for funding from the State of California's Transformative Climate Communities program. Acterra has also strengthened their partnership with program partner Cool the Earth, and another James Cary Smith grantee, Sustainable Contra Costa, to collaboratively grow their work in Bay Point and Pittsburg.

Capacity Building Best Practices

Acterra has reached community members and built partnerships with other local organizations through their environmental justice efforts. Acterra has significantly expanded their participant base by:

- Partnering with other community-based organizations (CBOs) for outreach to potential GoEV participants
- Providing stipends for CBOs for their outreach efforts
- Inviting CBOs to attend Acterra's events, using the opportunity to connect attendees to additional actions

"The James Cary Smith program really allowed us to do a deep dive in a community that we consider [to be] of critical need, and it aligned very well with what our goals were, organizationally...It's increased our access to other types of contracts, because we can say we've had successful deliverables for the JCS award."

- Lauren Weston, Executive Director of Acterra



Bike East Bay: Environmental & Transportation Justice Club

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Bike East Bay

[Bike East Bay](#) supports biking education efforts and empowers communities to advocate for safety-focused biking infrastructure. Bicycling is an important alternative form of transportation that decreases emissions, thereby improving air quality. However, there are many barriers that prevent biking from being a feasible mode of transportation, including lack of adequate and safe infrastructure. Bike East Bay is mindful of the persistent, inequitable government investment in bike infrastructure in communities of color and therefore prioritizes bicycle advocacy in historically disinvested communities. Bike East Bay received James Cary Smith Community grant funds for the Transportation & Environmental Justice Club in Pittsburg and Concord for 2022-2025. This program provides opportunities for high school students to develop biking and safety skills, ride together to observe and assess infrastructure needs in their communities, and engage in local infrastructure advocacy.

Transportation & Environmental Justice Club

Youth Education & Capacity Building

The Transportation & Environmental Justice Club supports approximately 60 students across three high schools to improve their bicycling skills and to instill a love of biking by hosting regular group rides, leading repair sessions, providing transit planning lessons, and building civic engagement skills. Bike East Bay provides club members with their own bicycle, helmet, and lock before their first group ride. Group rides provide a fun opportunity to get outdoors with other members while applying transit planning concepts by taking a critical look at biking infrastructure needs along the way. Bike East Bay also partners with the Bike Kitchen, a community-led repair and training space run by Bike Concord, to help students build confidence and self-sufficiency in their biking skills, while also providing a supportive, caring community.



"The more we get people involved in their advocacy, the more we empower them to choose biking for their transportation."

- Dani Lanis, Advocacy Manager



Bike East Bay *teaches students about the history of transit planning and inequitable benefits and impacts based on how cities are designed and maintained.* For example, students learn that higher rates of biking fatalities occur in majority Black and Brown neighborhoods where governments have not invested in safe traffic and bicycling infrastructure. The educational component of the Transportation & Environmental Justice Club establishes a strong foundation for informing students’ civic engagement at the local level.

Youth Civic Engagement Preparation & Skill Building



The Transportation & Environmental Justice Club provides students with opportunities to develop skills for local advocacy efforts. Bike East Bay supports young people to identify advocacy priorities, conduct research, and develop and refine presentations while collaborating with peers and Bike East Bay staff. The youth in the Club practice delivering their presentation and receive coaching to be most impactful and informative in public settings.

Students have presented to a variety of public bodies about unsafe intersections and opportunities to promote safe biking infrastructure, including presenting to the Concord City Council, Concord Pedestrian Advisory Committee, East Bay Parks, and the Contra Costa Water District.

Partnerships & Collaboration

Bike East Bay proactively seeks collaboration with many organizations in its efforts to promote safe bicycle infrastructure and develop the capacity of community members to engage in local advocacy. For example, Bike East Bay is enhancing the Transportation & Environmental Justice Club program by building a partnership with Urban Habitat, an Oakland based James Cary Smith grantee with a focus on equitable transportation policy. They have also partnered with Contra Costa Health and 511 Contra Costa to promote a series of inclusive community group bike rides, encouraging residents to choose biking for transportation.

Bike East Bay has shared information with James Cary Smith Community grantees for safe route planning and legal resources for bicyclists, overall supporting mutual efforts for reducing emissions and increasing community awareness of clean transportation alternatives. Bike East Bay also partnered with [Acterra](#) to promote awareness of air quality and environmental justice issues across their membership networks.

Bike East Bay hopes to continue partnering with the Air District to inform local policy and shift the transportation culture towards biking—one ride at a time.

Removing Barriers & Promoting Inclusivity

Bike East Bay ensures all high school students can participate in bicycling regardless of their socio-economic status or primary language by:

- Providing Spanish-language translation for all in-person meetings
- Utilizing simultaneous closed caption translation in the member’s primary language for all virtual meetings
- Provide bikes, helmets, locks, or other materials at no cost to participants



Breathe California: Community Action for Increasing Health Equity

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Breathe California

[Breathe California of the Bay Area, Golden Gate, and Central Coast \(Breathe California\)](#) was founded in 1911 as the Santa Clara Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis. Originally focused on bringing prevention education, screening, and public health infrastructure to residents in need, Breathe California has since expanded their work to address asthma and tobacco prevention as well as advocacy for clean air policies. Breathe California considers any kind of virus or contaminant that moves through the lungs as under their purview. As Margo Sidener, Deputy Executive Director, puts it: **"unlike the other organs in the body, the lungs are open to the environment, and therefore hardest hit by anything that happens with the environment, any kind of pollution or airborne disease."** During the clean air movement of the 1960s, Breathe California began focusing on air quality conservation in addition to lung disease, and has since been effective at mobilizing communities in Santa Clara County to fight transportation emissions, woodburning, industrial emissions, gasoline leaf blowers, wildfire effects, and climate change.

Community Action for Increasing Health Equity

Breathe California is committed to on-the-ground organizing to address health disparities and promote better health outcomes. The Community Action for Increasing Health Equity project in downtown and East Side San José utilizes a Community Action Model (CAM), which equips Emerging Community Leaders (ECLs) with the skills and resources they need to affect their communities' health. Through the grant program, ECLs have:

- Collected more than 200 surveys
- Facilitated a focus group
- Collaborated with local organizations, community groups, and schools
- Led tabling events, presentations, and educational training
- Initiated a door-knocking campaign
- Developed a community profile

ECLs used these tactics to inform the community on specific, prioritized environmental health issues while mobilizing residents to engage in air quality and lung health within San José communities.



The next phase for the Community Action for Increasing Health Equity project includes ECLs using the data they have collected and base of engaged community members to participate in public meetings, connect with public officials, and advance policy actions that improve the environment and community health. Margo Sidener described the importance of funding capacity building initiatives: **“The [James Cary Smith grant managers] trusted us to use the CAM program that is training Emerging Community Leaders. Not every group would pay to do that. We are training community leaders, and that will help us in the future – it’s the most sustainable kind of health education program that there is.”** Although this model has been used for tobacco control, CAM for air quality was a new model for Breathe California, made possible through the funding they receive from the Air District.

Capacity Building Best Practices

Through the Community Action Model (CAM), Breathe California and the ECLs are well-positioned to authentically partner with community members and have identified some best practices in building a base of community advocates:

- **Relationships:** Relationships are the core of community engagement and participation.
- **Meaningful engagement:** Community members will want to understand how they will benefit from civic participation around environmental justice and how their engagement will make a difference.
- **Rapport & Trust:** Community members expect respect and may be wary of trusting organizations or outsiders. Community leaders should seek to build rapport over time.
- **Patience:** Change at the community level takes time, and each community will move at a difference pace.

Partnerships & Collaboration

Through James Cary Smith grantee convenings, Breathe California has formed many meaningful connections with other grantees and, as a result, expanded their reach to more populations throughout the Bay Area:

- Breathe California and International Children Assistance Network (ICAN) collaborated to engage and inform Vietnamese community members about affordable options for owning electric vehicles as well as referring ICAN’s program participants to Breathe California’s services for tobacco control and asthma.
- Breathe California collaborated with Acterra to expand participation in Breathe’s annual *EV Ride and Drive*, including leading vehicle demonstrations.
- Breathe California and Brightline Defense collaborated to provide asthma services and distribute air filters to reach high-risk populations in San Francisco.

Looking Ahead

As ECLs continue community education and mobilizing a broader base of advocates, more San José and Bay Area residents will have the capacity to advocate for policies that best protect their communities. Breathe looks forward to partnering with the Air District on policies related to air pollution regulation, especially where it aligns with lung health.

“I think that [the] Air District really does have a vision of protecting the community...And so, I think usually our vision is the same.” – Margo Sidener, Deputy Executive Director of Breathe California



BrightAction Communities: Empowering San José Residents to Reduce Air Pollution



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BrightAction Communities

[*BrightAction Communities*](#) (formerly Community Climate Solutions) works in the community to connect people to information and tools to reduce their household emissions, which also improves health and saves families money. By connecting community members to these tools and each other, BrightAction Communities helps individuals feel more connected and empowered to help create a safer and more resilient community. [*The Empowering San José Residents to Reduce Air Pollution project focuses on community organizing and leadership development in the San José neighborhoods most impacted by poor air quality.*](#) The project seeks to educate community members on the impacts of air pollution and ways to reduce the exposure that their families experience. [*BrightAction Communities also prepares community members to participate in the local policy process to help reduce emissions city-wide.*](#)

"We all have potential to make impact."

- Lisa Altieri, Founder and President

Empowering San José Residents to Reduce Air Pollution

Community Workshops

BrightAction Communities offers monthly Community Workshops. In each 60-90-minute workshop, they engage 20-50 community members with interactive educational experiences. They also provide air filters and electric cooktops to participants. Staff focus on building a foundation of understanding regardless of community members' prior knowledge of air quality issues. In response to the needs of prioritized communities, the workshops are offered primarily in Spanish, with some in English.

Train the Trainers Program

Through this program, BrightAction Communities recruits individuals from the identified neighborhoods in San José for a



leadership program. The leadership trainees attend events and learn about air pollution, its effects, how to reduce exposure, and how to give presentations at BrightAction Communities's Community Workshops. Trainees then lead workshops with Bright Action Communities's Community Organizer and Program Manager. To demonstrate the value of leadership trainees' experiences and skills, BrightAction Communities pays the leaders throughout their training period and for presentations via funding from the James Cary Smith Community Grant Program. These payments also ensure that the opportunity to become a community leader and trainer is accessible to more community members.

Partnership & Collaboration

BrightAction Communities actively seeks partnerships and collaborations with other James Cary Smith grantees doing similar work in San José and beyond. This has helped to expand their reach and introduce new educational components into their programs.

BrightAction Communities partnered with [LUNA \(Latinos United for a New America\)](#), an organization embedded in the San José communities where BrightAction Communities is also working. BrightAction Communities has also partnered with [Acterra](#) on some of their community events to bring together air filter and electric vehicle information. Additionally, BrightAction Communities connected with [Brightline Defense](#) and [Tri-Valley Air Quality Climate Alliance](#) to discuss incorporating homemade box fan air filters into future community events.

Capacity Building Best Practices

BrightAction Communities has identified some best practices in their work to build capacity in the community, which they summarize as *humanizing the experience*:

- Connect people to each other with interactive education and base building.
- Actively listen to what the community is saying to better understand their needs.
- Consider what participants can or cannot access to inform how they can change their household emissions (e.g., homeownership, public transportation).

Looking Ahead



BrightAction Communities will continue engaging with other James Cary Smith grantees to learn more about what other grantees are doing in their communities to decrease emissions. They are also interested in examples and resources for activating their membership and leadership trainees in capacity building to inform local policy.

"Our overriding mission is to catalyze and empower action on climate change, but also, in the process of doing that work, to really create more resilient, connected fair, just, and equitable communities."

- Lisa Altieri, Founder and President of BrightAction Communities

Latinos United for a New America (LUNA): Air Quality Campaign

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Latinos United for a New America

Community organizers founded [*Latinos United for a New America \(LUNA\)*](#) in 2013 to empower Latinx residents of the Tropicana neighborhood of East San José around immigration rights. As a grassroots base building organization, LUNA responded to community surveys by expanding its work to include housing and environmental justice. [*LUNA works to realize its long-term vision of an empowered and engaged community of advocates in marginalized and immigrant neighborhoods by building capacity for civic participation and advocacy.*](#)

LUNA launched an Air Quality Campaign to educate communities on the effects of poor air quality, a campaign which transitioned from community education to targeted capacity building with seven neighborhood associations, including both an Environmental Justice Academy as well as a Promotores program.

Environmental Justice Academy

In 2023, a total of 32 community members participated in LUNA's Environmental Justice Academy. Over the course of six sessions, participants learned about six environmental justice topics: air quality and contamination, water conservation, land quality and food security, sustainability, and disaster preparedness. After these sessions, participants formed groups to lead projects relevant to their communities. Community-identified projects focused on recycling efforts, building planters out of unused tires, community tree planting events, and more. As a result of the Environmental Justice Academy, more community leaders in East San José are equipped to lead civic engagement efforts for environmental justice.

Promotores & Capacity Building

LUNA cultivates leaders from impacted communities to engage in environmental justice outreach within their own communities. For that reason, LUNA supports Promotores who are committed to improving their families' air quality as well as developing their own leadership capacity. In 2023 with James Cary Smith Community Grant Program funds, LUNA recruited and trained 13 Promotores on accessing and interpreting air quality data. Promotores also honed their presentation skills to effectively share crucial information with other community members on improving indoor air quality. Additionally, LUNA's Promotores initiated a sustainability campaign by conducting a door-knocking, educational and awareness initiative.



LUNA has identified several best practices in their capacity building activities with Promotores:

- **Support growth in a diversity of skills.** Promotores should be supported to grow a diversity of skills. LUNA has found Promotores can be most effective when they are comfortable with computer skills, such as using digital calendars and spreadsheets. Additionally, Promotores often need to increase their data literacy and understanding of air quality and environmental justice issues.
- **Compensate community leaders and experts.** LUNA started their air quality and environmental justice work by preparing community volunteers to present at community education events. With increased James Cary Smith Community Grant funds, they began compensating these volunteers and expanded the training to the Promotores model, recognizing the essential expertise and skills of these community members.
- **Organizing moves at the speed of trust.** LUNA values relationships, first and foremost. As an organization with a strong presence in the neighborhoods in which they organize, they are able to build on that longstanding relationship to support the work of Promotores.

Partnership & Collaboration



LUNA has collaborated with Community Climate Solutions, another James Cary Smith grantee, to host community events, resulting in events growing to more than 60 participants at a time.

LUNA has also partnered with the [Bay Air Center](#) to provide technical expertise on air quality science. Scientists at the Bay Air Center trained Promotores to build their knowledge around air quality data. For example, Promotores learned about testing and analyzing particulate matter. Cesar Navarro, a Community Organizer with LUNA, reflected on the value of this partnership: *“Air quality is such a broad and also very deep topic. There’s a lot of science in it, so it’s been awesome to bridge the gap between technical literacy and providing digestible, easily understandable, and accessible information to people.”*

Looking Ahead

LUNA seeks to bridge the gap between individualized action and community change for environmental justice in East San José. LUNA identified the need for a tree barrier at the intersection of Highway 101 and Highway 280 to improve community air quality and health, and to help reduce exposure to high concentrations of pollutants near heavily traveled roadways and highways. The air quality measuring station at this intersection consistently measures in the 80th to 100th percentile for air pollution, some of the highest air pollution in the Bay Area. For this campaign, LUNA is building community capacity to advocate for the installation of a tree barrier at the highway intersection. Promotores and past Environmental Justice Academy participants will leverage their prior training and successful campaigns to create a three-pronged ecosystem of engagement opportunities for East San José community members by engaging school communities, homeowners, and tenants in tree planting events to advance this policy advocacy effort.

“We don’t want to only protect the inside of our home. We want systemic solutions. We don’t only want folks to follow us, but we want folks who can think for themselves and be the change where they are.”
—Socorro Montaña. Co-Director & Organizing Coordinator



San Francisco Transit Riders: Transit Justice Coalition

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San Francisco Transit Riders

A major contributor to poor air quality in San Francisco is the reliance on personal vehicles. [San Francisco Transit Riders \(SFTR\)](#) knows that San Francisco needs an affordable, accessible public transit system that will improve air quality by reducing emissions. Compounding this need, government agencies have historically divested from communities of color and low-income neighborhoods, resulting in a lack of robust and reliable access to public transit for these communities. SFTR envisions a future where all individuals can cross San Francisco in thirty minutes via public transit. To that end, SFTR **engages community members to advocate to government agencies and public officials for infrastructure that meets their transit needs**. SFTR received James Cary Smith Community Grant funds for the Transit Justice Coalition to conduct a needs assessment of transit route priorities and preferences of Bayview Hunters Point residents in Southeast San Francisco. The Transit Justice Coalition is also using grant funds to build the capacity of residents in the Bayview and Excelsior neighborhoods to meaningfully participate in SFMTA's public processes.



The Transit Justice Coalition

Community Engagement & Relationship Building

Newly operating in Bayview Hunters Point during the James Cary Smith Community Grant program, SFTR built partnerships with local organizations who have existing relationships with community members. Relationship building is a critical component of developing an eager and informed member base who can participate in transit justice initiatives. SFTR listens to community members to understand their needs, is responsive to residents' questions, identifies supportive resources, and builds communities' capacity to engage in air quality policy and planning. For program events throughout 2023, SFTR engaged over 1,100 Bayview residents.

"We have partnered with several groups in the Bayview that the Air District has connected us with...it's been super helpful for working in a neighborhood where we're pretty new. So, working with organizations that already have connections has been really helpful."

- Community Organizer, SFTR



Transit Community Needs Assessment

The Transit Justice Coalition conducted a needs assessment in 2023, through which SFTR surveyed 262 Bayview residents, conducted in-depth interviews with 30 of those respondents, and formed partnerships with 21 other Bayview community organizations. The needs assessment revealed the community's transit priorities, including more frequent service, accurate and on-time transit, extended late-night hours on transit routes, and faster and streamlined routes. SFTR and the Transit Justice Coalition presented these transit equity priorities in memos and presentations to SFMTA's Board of Directors and to the District Supervisor.

Best Practices for Community Engagement

Become a known resource: The more individual relationships and community partnerships an organization or coalition builds, the more people will seek out that team with questions or ideas. By generating interest in the organization and becoming a known resource, an organization can better understand the local context and needs.

Build trust through meaningful engagement and partnership: Come to events prepared with the data and information already gathered and with clear action steps for participants to take after the event. This helps participants feel that the organization has made the best use of their time and establishes a foundation of trusted partnership.

Learn how the residents communicate: Some communities responded best to text messages and digital flyers, rather than online invitations. Tailoring communications helps promote events and allows residents to share information with personal networks.

Capacity Building: Bayview Shuttle Pilot Program

Through the relationships formed with community members and organizational partnerships, the Transit Justice Coalition has had increasing engagement with SFMTA. For example, SFMTA's 2024 Bayview Shuttle pilot program offers a temporary shuttle service for Bayview residents to assess transit needs, including high-demand routes and service times. Over time, SFMTA will collect data on the most in-demand transportation points to plan new bus routes that best meet residents' needs.

Essential to this pilot program is the Bayview Community Congress, a quarterly meeting of community residents that shares feedback on the pilot program and transit needs while having decision-making authority over various aspects of the program. SFTR supports the Community Congress's quarterly meetings and capacity building of residents and shared that *the Community Congress's decision-making power represents a different kind of community engagement from SFMTA*. Overall, the engagement and role of the Community Congress appears promising for the outcomes of the pilot program and Bayview transit access.

Looking Ahead

To continue building local capacity to inform transit decisions, SFTR's Transit Justice Coalition is focusing on an upcoming ballot initiative for a transit funding measure that will determine whether the transportation services in Bayview are cut or funded.

The Transit Justice Coalition is shifting from community education to action, *leveraging the Coalition's relationships and partnerships to ensure residents can meaningfully participate in public processes and advocacy to shape the future of transit in San Francisco*.



Strategic Energy Innovations: Energize Schools

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Strategic Energy Innovations

Strategic Energy Innovations (SEI) is an environmental education and workforce development nonprofit that educates and empowers students and emerging professionals to accelerate climate solutions. SEI received James Cary Smith Community Grant funds for their Energize Schools K-12 program for 2022-2025 to provide project-based curriculum and instructional support, empowering young people to lead environmental action campaigns and reduce air pollution in their communities.

To address the environmental issues associated with greenhouse gases and promote energy efficiency in the built environment, SEI builds partnerships with diverse stakeholders in the education sector to engage:

- Youth and educators in K-12 schools (Energize Schools program)
- Emerging Professionals who participate in vocational training and internships in public infrastructure and decarbonization sectors (Energize Careers, SEI's Climate Corps Fellowship)
- Faculty in higher education that participate in praxis groups (Energize Colleges)

Energize Schools Program

Through *Energize Schools*, middle and high school students identify air quality issues and participate in two challenges to develop and implement sustainability and conservation campaigns. In the first year of the James Cary Smith Community Grant Program, SEI implemented Energize Schools at 34 middle and high schools.

During the program, students learn about air quality and interrelated climate issues, how to use the CalEnviroScreen tool, and about environmental health disparities across communities. Students identify their environmental topic of concern and plan two action campaigns over the course of the year while learning project management and policy advocacy skills. Throughout the challenges, SEI "Challenge Advisors" are available to provide teachers and students with instructional support such as visiting their classrooms or campaign planning. Across all of SEI's Energy Conservation Competitions, student campaigns have saved more than 915,000 kWh of electricity resulting in savings totaling nearly \$130,000 for schools.

Student Campaigns

Environmental club leaders at a high school in San Mateo County spearheaded a 4-day project to educate almost 500 members of their school community about waste sorting practices. The resulting waste audit led to the school adding recycling and compost bins on campus.

Educators described that *the most valuable moment for the students has been when they moved into implementation and saw their campaigns come to life.*



BAY AREA AIR QUALITY
MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

SEI's Best Practices for Capacity Building



- Take time to build relationships and *understand the needs* of schools and teachers
- *Expand school partnerships* by connecting to teachers' personal networks and engaging district-level STEM officers
- *Identify guest speakers* to speak on specific air quality issues
- *Draw connections to green career pathways* and local organizations that may be of interest to students' future professional careers
- Remain *flexible and adaptable* to year-round schedules, including busy periods

Partnership & Collaboration

SEI has successfully cultivated student leadership through their NGSS-aligned sustainability curriculum, Green Career webinars and toolkit, through youth that have participated in Energize Schools' K-12 programming, and campus support for green teams. **SEI is eager to partner with the Air District to build upon this student leadership.** Air District employees could teach students about:

- How to monitor legislation and the stages of policy or rule development
- Strategies to influence policy and how to submit letters to public officials.
- Methods for civic engagement and how to participate in public meetings or submit public comments
- Specific policies, such as amendments to [Rule 9-4](#) and [Rule 9-6](#) to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides from furnaces and water heaters



Looking Ahead

With James Cary Smith Community Grant funding, SEI has expanded their curriculum offerings and provided more resources to support teachers to lead environmental education curricula in the classroom. In the future, SEI hopes to expand their program to serve more schools while maintaining their existing partnerships. Additionally, SEI envisions developing a full-length Career and Technical Education (CTE) course in high school that emphasizes the intersection of urban planning with environmental issues.

"We hope that students who participate in air quality challenges can tap into their creativity and recognize the power they have to make a positive difference... These are the first steps for future grassroots advocacy."
- **Aneri Rodriguez, Associate Program Manager at SEI**

TVAQCA: Tri-Valley Air Quality Climate Alliance

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The Bay Area Air Quality Management District's ("Air District") [James Cary Smith Community Grant Program](#) provides grants to community groups, neighborhood associations, and nonprofit organizations to uplift local efforts for capacity building in environmental justice work. Funds support community-based programs that address air quality and reduce exposure to air pollution by fostering authentic community participation in planning activities.

Tri-Valley Air Quality Climate Alliance

In recent years, the air quality in the Tri-Valley region has been significantly impacted by wildfires and the use of machinery with high emissions. Poor air quality directly impacts the health of the environment and community members. [Tri-Valley Air Quality Climate Alliance \(TVAQCA\)](#) works to improve the health of the Tri-Valley air shed in Dublin, Livermore, Pleasanton, and San Ramon, with a focus on low-income households most likely to be negatively impacted by poor air quality. TVAQCA received James Cary Smith Community Grant funds for their [Ensuring the Future Air Quality of the Tri-Valley Program](#) to increase the community's awareness and understanding of air quality, help residents understand the connection between climate change and air quality, and inspire the community to take steps to protect the air shed and residents' health.

Ensuring the Future Air Quality of the Tri-Valley Area

Building the Knowledge of Young Professionals & Other Community Members

TVAQCA recruits interns from community colleges and four-year colleges, with backgrounds ranging from advanced data analysis to wildfire preparedness. Over the course of their internship, students learn about local Climate Action Plans and gain experience communicating climate and air quality information to the public. With TVAQCA mentorship, interns execute impactful climate and air quality projects such as publishing independent research or exploring green rebate programs. Many interns go on to pursue careers in climate science and engineering.

TVAQCA also regularly engages the wider community through a variety of air quality outreach activities, including public events such as school and county fairs, and social media campaigns. The TVAQCA interns play a critical role in these efforts, showing up to help build DIY air filters or invite community members to use a microscope to examine the size of pollution particles compared to sand and pollen. As a result, TVAQCA has been able to meaningfully engage over 1,000 community members across a wide variety of in-person outreach events each year.



Local Policy Advocacy

Over the course of two years, TVAQCA worked to reduce emissions from an often-overlooked polluter: gas-powered landscaping equipment. Landscaping equipment does not utilize catalytic converters, and therefore produces significant emissions. With 670 landscaping companies in the Tri-Valley area, gas-powered landscaping equipment emissions rival those of vehicle emissions. Through thoughtful advocacy, leading with facts, and connecting emissions to health outcomes, the City of Pleasanton adopted an ordinance to ban gas-powered leaf blowers in June 2024. This effort was further bolstered by TVAQCA's 2022 Incentive Program that provided rebates to businesses and municipal operations to electrify landscaping equipment. Pleasanton is the first city in the Tri-Valley area to adopt this type of ordinance and TVAQCA plans to continue their leadership and advocacy with neighboring cities.

Partnership & Collaboration

TVAQCA regularly collaborates with other James Cary Smith grantees to share strategies, and also collaborates with Quest Science Center to engage the public with STEM and teach key air quality lessons to promote climate action. Additionally, TVAQCA's partnership with the Air District provides credibility to their community initiatives. In consultation with the Air District, TVAQCA will provide an expert perspective on any number of issues that impact air quality in the community, such as the use of leaded fuel at the local airport or phasing out gas-powered landscaping equipment.

Looking Ahead

TVAQCA hopes to continue its fruitful partnership with the Air District and other James Cary Smith grantees to expand its impact by increasing community engagement efforts at school and public health events, growing its internship program, and continuing to advocate for climate focused policy in the Tri-Valley.

TVAQCA Air Filter Distribution

TVAQCA has provided over 250 box fan air cleaners to low-income households vulnerable to the negative effects of poor air quality through their DIY box fan air filter program and the air cleaners provided by the Air District.

DIY Box Fan Filter Program

- Building and distributing the box fan air cleaners at these events generates significant interest in TVAQCA's mission.
- TVAQCA interns use this opportunity to educate community members about wildfire preparedness and the health impact from air pollution.

Air District Air Cleaners

- TVAQCA works closely with the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program to help mitigate the impacts of poor air quality through home air filters.



"There's so much to learn and do with a complex subject [like air quality] ...climate change can be overwhelming to think about, so talking about it in a practical and approachable way is essential to get the message across and see actions taking place."

- Terry Chang, Director of Operations at TVAQCA

