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In Neighborhoods

BUILDING A HEALTHY SACRAMENTO

# A Makeover for an Underpass

BY NATASHA VON KAENEL

It doesn't always take millions of dollars to improve a city. In fact, it is often the smaller projects, spearheaded by community members and activists, that can really transform a neighborhood.

Katie Valenzuela Garcia, an Oak Park resident and project consultant for an upcoming mural beautification project, knows this. Valenzuela Garcia has been working with Caliph Assagai of Public Interest Advocacy to transform the Highway 99 underpass at 2nd Avenue between Franklin and Alhambra boulevards into a place of pride for local residents.

The underpass is one of the main connections between Oak Park and Curtis Park and has been a source of blight and concern for many years.

"Residents really saw the underpass as a safety and security concern," Valenzuela Garcia says. "Traffic was moving really quick, it was really dark and people would park RVs under there for weeks at a time. It was terrible."

The plan to revamp the underpass was drafted with input and support from Public Interest Advocacy, The California Endowment's Building Healthy

Communities initiative, local residents and business owners, and other community supporters including Oak Park and Sierra Curtis Neighborhood Associations, the North Franklin District, and Oak Park Business District. Suggested changes include improving lighting, bike lanes and sidewalks, removing parking, and implementing traffic calming measures. But what Valenzuela Garcia is the most excited about is the mural.

**"THIS SORT OF THING CAN SEEM REALLY SMALL OR INSIGNIFICANT, BUT IT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE IN HOW PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD."**

*Katie Garcia, Project Consultant and Oak Park resident*

Phil America, an internationally known artist and writer based in Sacramento, has graciously volunteered his time to the project. And while the mural design is still

being finalized, Valenzuela Garcia says they plan on highlighting what has historically stood in both neighborhoods and what remains now. She hopes this project will improve cohesion between Oak Park and Curtis Park, and make the underpass "a place people move to, instead of a place people move through."

"This sort of thing can seem really small or insignificant, but it makes a big difference in how people feel about their neighborhood, how they feel about really walking around and interacting with their neighborhood," Valenzuela Garcia says. "Projects like this make people want to come outside and talk to people, to interact, to do things, and that increases health, both physical and mental health."

As well as improving the health of the local community, Valenzuela Garcia emphasizes that this project has empowered local residents to become decision makers in their neighborhood. The multiple community meetings where they debated different ways to transform the underpass "gives people exposure to what it looks like to create change in their neighborhood, and the more people we do that with, the more change agents we create and the healthier these neighborhoods become."

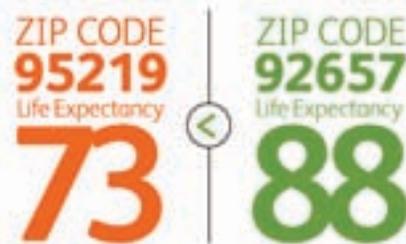


Caliph Assagai of Public Interest Advocacy and Oak Park resident Katie Valenzuela Garcia are working with the community to beautify the Highway 99 underpass at 2nd Avenue.

Photo by Anne Stokes

## BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

In 2010, The California Endowment launched a 10-year, \$1 billion plan to improve the health of 14 challenged communities across the state. Over the 10 years, residents, community-based organizations and public institutions will work together to address the socioeconomic and environmental challenges contributing to the poor health of their communities.



Your ZIP code shouldn't predict how long you'll live – but it does. Staying healthy requires much more than doctors and diets. Every day, our surroundings and activities affect how long – and how well – we'll live.

Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Health Happens in Schools.  
Health Happens with Prevention.

**Help make this project a reality!** Individuals or businesses can email their feedback about the project design to [2ndAvenueUnderpass@gmail.com](mailto:2ndAvenueUnderpass@gmail.com) or attend one of the upcoming stakeholder meetings. To donate to the project, mail a check to Public Interest Advocacy at 717 K Street, Suite 420, Sacramento, CA 95814, or email the above address for more options.



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