



The Last Stand: Unite mural by Carla Carr (2001), located in Leimert Park, Los Angeles

A JUST & SUSTAINABLE GUIDE TO SOUTH LA

UNDERSTANDING THE PAST, NAVIGATING THE PRESENT, AND IMAGINING THE FUTURE

Sustainability is more than environmental protection.

In South Los Angeles, sustainability is connected to clean air, transportation, food access, green space, community health, and environmental justice.

This guide explores how historical decisions shaped current challenges and how communities are working toward a more just and sustainable future.

How to Use This Guide

PAST:

Learn how historical decisions shaped South LA

PRESENT:

Explore today's sustainability challenges: air quality, transportation, food & green space access, extreme heat

FUTURE:

Discover community resources and future solutions!

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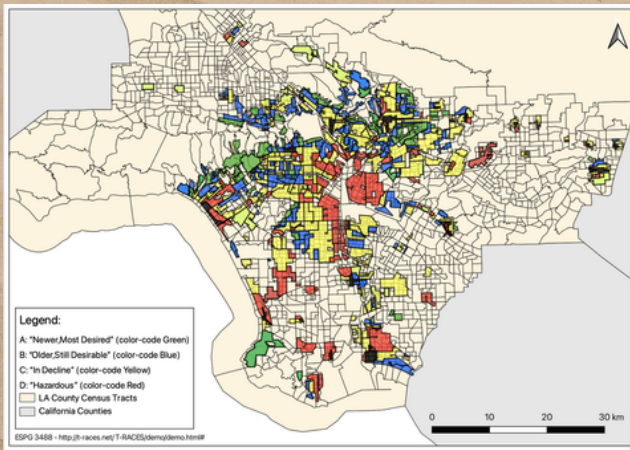
ENVIRON 188A: Final Project

How Did We Get Here?

The History of Environmental Justice in South LA

The environmental challenges facing South Los Angeles today did not emerge naturally. They were shaped by decades of housing discrimination, transportation planning, industrial development, and unequal investment. Understanding this history helps explain why environmental justice remains an important issue in South LA today.

Redlining & Segregation (1930s - 40s)



Historic redlining map of Los Angeles County (1939). Redlined neighborhoods often experienced decades of disinvestment and environmental burdens. ⁵

During the twentieth century, discriminatory housing policies such as redlining concentrated many Black and Latino residents into specific neighborhoods while limiting investment and economic opportunities. Historically redlined neighborhoods were often viewed as politically vulnerable and therefore more likely to bear the costs of urban development. ⁷

Freeways & Automobile Development (1950s - 60s)

Beginning in the 1950s, Los Angeles rapidly expanded its freeway network. Although freeways improved regional mobility, they frequently cut through communities of color, displacing residents, dividing neighborhoods, and increasing exposure to air and noise pollution. Researchers have found that freeway construction disproportionately burdened working-class communities and communities of color. ⁴



As Los Angeles became increasingly designed around automobiles, public transit declined and car ownership became essential for accessing jobs, education, and services. This shift toward automobile dependence continues to influence transportation patterns today. ²

South LA is one of the most demographically diverse regions in California, with a population of approximately 812,847 residents.²⁶

67.2% Hispanic
2.5% Asian
3.8% non-Hispanic White
23.6% Black

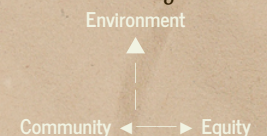
Sustainability & Environmental Justice

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

Sustainability is not only about protecting the environment. It also means looking at how decisions about resource allocation, development, and infrastructure shape people's lives. Throughout Los Angeles history, planning decisions were often made without the meaningful participation of communities most affected by them. Projects such as freeway construction and industrial expansion brought economic growth and regional development, but they also concentrated environmental burdens in many low-income communities and communities of color. Understanding sustainability requires examining who benefits from development, who bears its costs, and how historical inequalities continue to shape present-day conditions. ^{3 7}

South LA provides a powerful example of these dynamics. Practices of redlining, freeway construction, industrial zoning, and disinvestment helped shape many of the environmental and social challenges the community faces today. Issues of air pollution, transportation, and unequal access to green space are not isolated problems; they are connected to decades of policy decisions and unequal distributions of resources and power. ^{5 8}

Understanding this history highlights the importance of environmental justice, community participation, and equitable development in creating a more sustainable future.



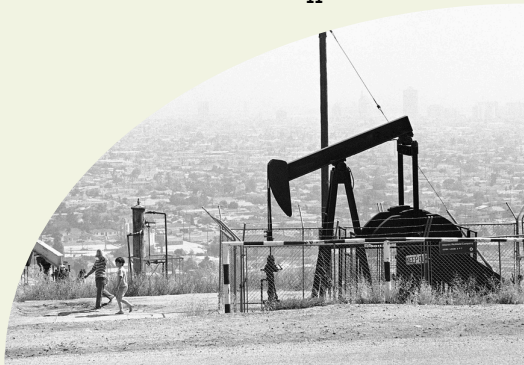
AIR QUALITY AND HEALTH

Why is air quality an issue in South LA?

Understanding the Issue

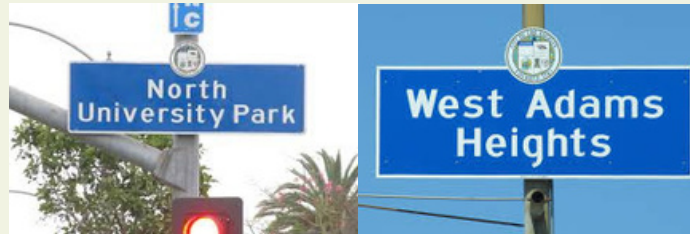
In the 20th century, South Los Angeles developed in a way that placed industry and housing side by side. Oil drilling expanded early on and was later surrounded by neighborhoods as the city grew. At the same time, discriminatory housing policies like redlining pushed Black and Latino residents into areas closer to factories, oil fields, and new freeways. By the 1960s and 1970s, many residents were living directly next to these pollution sources, which led to long-term air quality and health impacts. ¹³

"Researchers have found that the stroke death rate in South LA is the highest in the county - 40 per 100,000 residents compared to the county's average of 33 per 100,000 residents. On average, a South Central LA resident will live five years less, and a Watts resident will live nearly eight years less than the average LA City resident." - Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. ¹¹



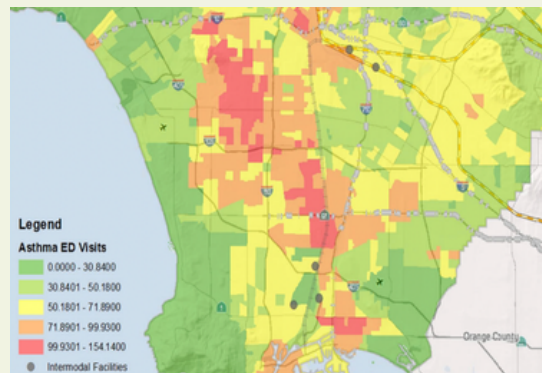
Case Study: Oil Drilling + Traffic Impacts on Health and Air Quality in South LA

Community-Based Participatory Research in two South LA neighborhoods. ⁹



1. Health Impacts

People living within roughly 1,500 feet of oil drilling sites in **West Adams** and **University Park** experience significantly worse respiratory health compared to residents across the rest of LA. Research shows that **20.3%** of interviewees in West Adams reported a diagnosed case of asthma, while University Park reported a rate of **16.1%**. In contrast, the South Los Angeles baseline is **9.8%**. These findings suggest a clear association between closer proximity to oil production sites and a higher respiratory health burden. Consistent with this pattern, South Los Angeles also records some of the highest rates of asthma-related emergency department visits, at **84.1 per 10,000 people**. ^{9 10}

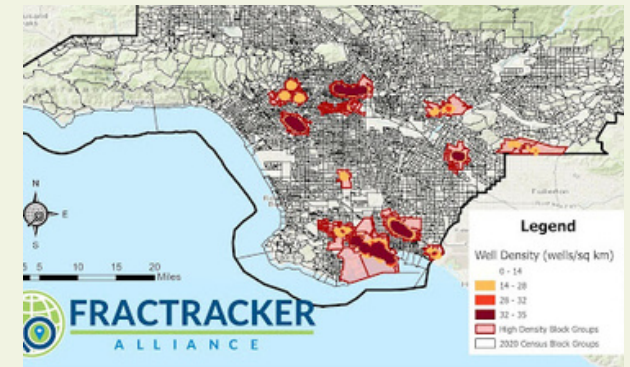


Findings:

2. Awareness and Information Gap

Beyond health-related circumstances, another major finding was how little residents knew about the oil infrastructure around them. In University Park, **45.8%** of participants were unaware of nearby oil operations, compared to **38.9%** in West Adams. In addition, a large majority reported not knowing how to report air quality concerns: **78.5%** in University Park and **76.9%** in West Adams.

Taken together, these findings point to more than just limited awareness. They reveal a clear gap in access to environmental information and reporting systems, leaving many residents near industrial activity without knowing it exists or how to report concerns. ⁹



Concentration of oil rigs in GLA

3. Pollution Signals and Air Quality

The air quality findings show that while overall methane levels were broadly similar between sites, there were clear short-term pollution spikes near the active drilling area. These brief events reached increases of up to about **1.0 ppm** and occurred more frequently near the oil site than at the control location. This suggests that even if average conditions look comparable, nearby residents may still experience intermittent exposure to higher pollution levels linked to local oil activity. ^{9 12}

TRANSPORTATION & MOBILITY

How do transportation systems shape sustainability in South Los Angeles?

Car Dependency

The Problem: Los Angeles remained highly dependent on automobiles, contributing to traffic congestion, air pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). Transportation produces approximately 33% of LA County GHG. ¹⁷

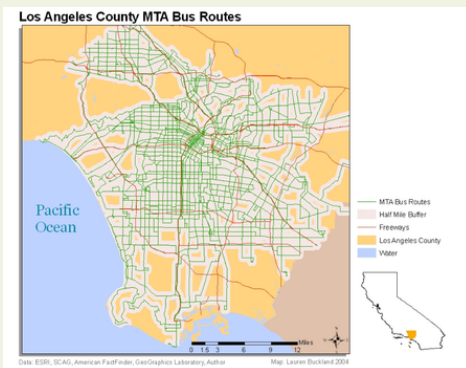


Transit Access Inequality

The Problem: Many South LA residents rely on public transit, yet access to reliable transportation remains uneven. Communities with lower vehicle ownership often face greater barriers to jobs, healthcare, and educational opportunities. ¹⁶

Walkability

The Problem: Walkable neighborhoods encourage healthier lifestyles and reduce dependence on automobiles, but access to safe pedestrian infrastructure varies significantly across Los Angeles. ^{16 19}



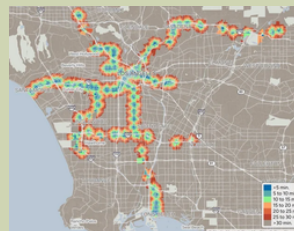
Los Angeles County MTA bus routes. The distribution of transit infrastructure influences residents' access to economic opportunities and essential services. ⁴

Why Does Transportation Matter?

Transportation is closely connected to economic opportunity in South Los Angeles. Access to reliable transportation determines whether residents can reach jobs, schools, healthcare facilities, and other essential services. Historically, discriminatory housing policies, freeway construction, and economic disinvestment contributed to a pattern in which many South Los Angeles residents became physically separated from growing employment centers throughout the region. As jobs increasingly dispersed across Los Angeles County, reliable transportation became essential for accessing economic opportunities.

For many residents, transportation barriers can limit upward mobility. Long commute times, unreliable transit service, and the high costs associated with car ownership can make it more difficult to secure stable employment or access higher-paying jobs. Researchers have described this pattern as a form of "cumulative disadvantage," where limited transportation options reinforce existing social and economic inequalities. Communities with inadequate transportation access often face reduced employment opportunities, lower incomes, and greater economic hardship compared to areas with stronger transit connections.

Improving transportation access can help connect residents to jobs, reduce commuting burdens, and expand economic opportunity. Investments in public transit, affordable transportation options, and transit-oriented development can play an important role in promoting both economic mobility and environmental sustainability in South Los Angeles. ^{19 21 25}



TRANSPORTATION AT A GLANCE



Transportation produces about 33% of LA County greenhouse gas emissions. ¹⁷



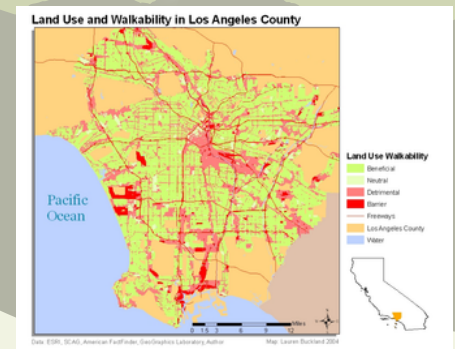
Transit access affects access to jobs, healthcare, and education.



Transportation barriers can contribute to economic inequality.



Walkable neighborhoods reduce dependence on automobiles and support healthier communities.



Land use and walkability across Los Angeles County. Green areas support pedestrian activity, while red areas represent barriers to walkability such as freeways and large automobile-oriented developments. ⁴

Learn More

See "Resources" for ideas on how South Los Angeles can create a more equitable, accessible, and sustainable transportation system:

- Metro LIFE Program
- Metro Bike Share
- Rail-to-Rail Corridor
- Vision Zero LA
- Metro K Line Extension

NUTRITION

Food Accessibility

The case study shown provides a general overview of the demographics in South Los Angeles, as the area has historically experienced higher poverty and unemployment rates than the rest of California. ²⁴

This lack of fresh produce availability is associated with impoverished areas, as a result of historical redlining. Specifically, limited economic opportunities and contributed to unequal access to resources such as grocery stores and fresh produce. As a result, many South LA neighborhoods continue to experience food insecurity and reduced access to healthy foods. This could negatively impact an individual's health outcome over time.

Community Calls for Fruit-Bearing Trees

Researchers found that many South LA residents specifically expressed interest in planting fruit-bearing trees on public land.

Food access is one of several challenges residents face, along with limited green space. When basic needs such as food and housing are difficult to meet, other community improvement efforts often become less of a priority. ⁶

Case Study

The Food Environment in 3 Neighborhoods in South Los Angeles, California: Access, Availability, Quality, and Marketing Practices

Limited access to affordable and nutritious food is seen across South Los Angeles. When observing three neighborhoods in South LA, researchers found that 52%-65% of the population in each neighborhood lived at or below 185% of the federal poverty level. In this study, 55% of food retail stores did not sell fresh fruits and vegetables. ⁶



Comparison of brick-and-mortar food source types and food-insecure census tracts in 3 low-income neighborhoods in South Los Angeles, California, 2016.

GREEN SPACES

Green Space Availability

Green spaces, particularly parks and trees, provide several benefits such as cleaner air, cooler streets, and reduced water pollution. ¹ However, trees are not evenly distributed in California, as formerly redlined areas in LA have lower tree coverage, resulting in weather 7.6 degrees higher than their counterparts. ⁸ Apart from the environmental benefits, this uneven distribution results in missed health and social benefits in South LA. Specifically, increased tree coverage and access to nature have been linked to improved mental well-being, reduced heat-related illnesses, and increased community engagement. ²⁵

A Vision for Community-Led Resilience

"To ensure equity, it is also critical that frontline communities are leading the way in planning and implementing new green spaces in their own neighborhoods. Joint public-private ownership of new green spaces between the City and community land trusts would be the best way to utilize City resources to support community-led efforts to reduce green space inequities." ⁸

EXTREME HEAT

Heat-Related Illnesses

Extreme heat has been identified as the primary climate hazard facing Los Angeles by the Los Angeles Climate Emergency Mobilization Office. A danger of extreme heat is health-related illnesses. Between 2009 and 2018, 500,000 additional Emergency Room visits for Angelenos resulted from heat-related illnesses. ²³

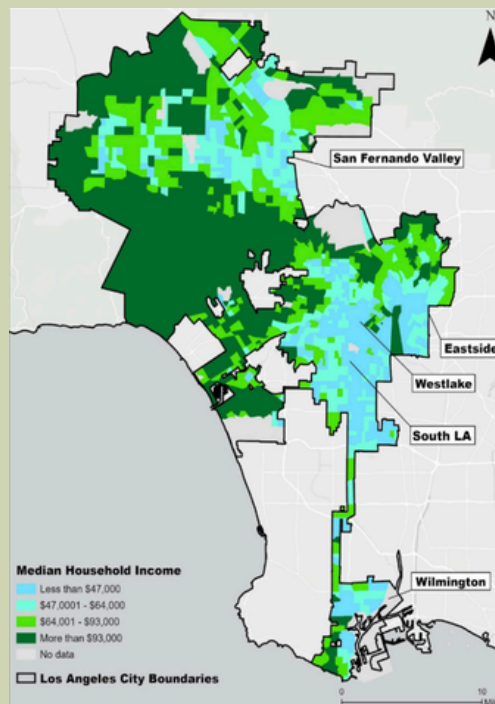
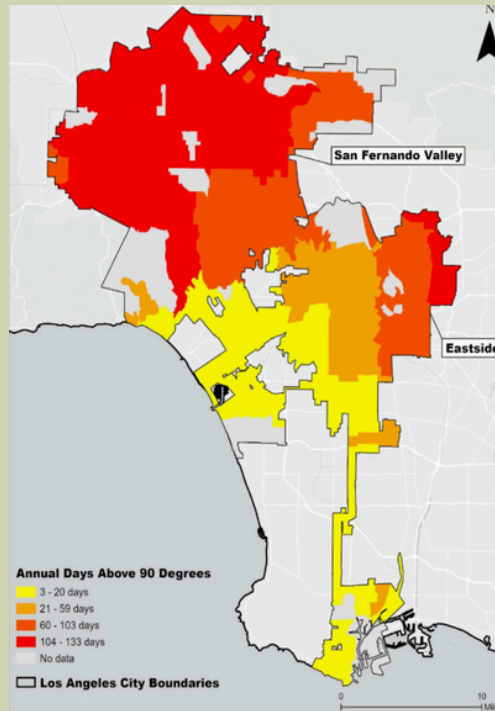
Additional Vulnerabilities

South LA is especially vulnerable because communities of color and low-income households face greater exposure to extreme heat due to historical policies such as redlining. ²³

Additionally, the South LA area is especially vulnerable to these ER visits, since about 30% of individuals with high blood pressure or asthma conditions have reported worsened conditions due to extreme heat. ²³

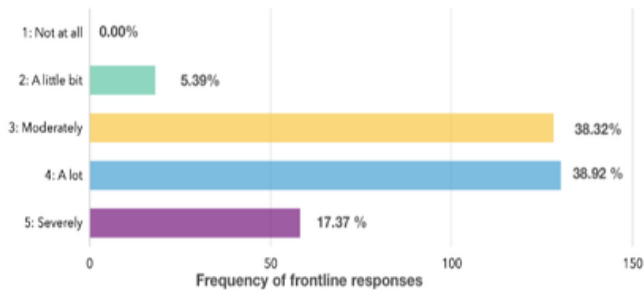
The South LA area overall has low tree canopy and many heat-absorbing materials, such as concrete, which increases temperatures and threatens the health of residents. ²³

Extreme Heat + Los Angeles by Census Tract



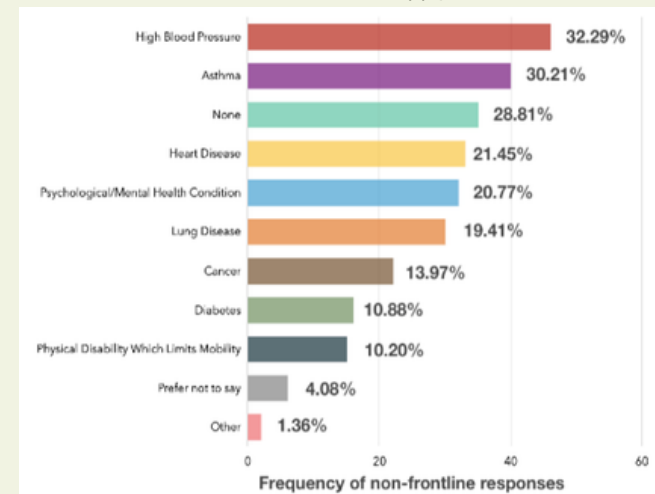
South Los Angeles Focus Group Findings

On a scale of 1-5, how much do you think extreme heat personally threatens your health, safety, and wellbeing?



Do you or a family member have any of these health conditions that are affected by extreme heat?

Check ALL that apply



Focus Group Participants:

The study included 68 frontline community members across seven focus groups. Most participants were residents of South Los Angeles, Westlake, or the San Fernando Valley, with a plurality identifying as Black or African American. About 70% reported annual incomes below \$50,000, over half were age 50 or older, and participants represented diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Hispanic, Latinx, and Indigenous migrant communities from Mexico and Central America. ⁶

AN IDEAL FUTURE: WHAT WOULD A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE SOUTH LA LOOK LIKE?

Air Quality



What Would Equitable Air Quality Look Like?

- Clean air for all residents, regardless of race, income, or neighborhood
- Reduced pollution from freeways, freight corridors, industry, and oil drilling
- Lower rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses
- Healthier neighborhoods with fewer environmental burdens
- Greater community participation in environmental decision-making

What Would Sustainable Air Quality Look Like?

- Long-term protection of air quality and public health
- Cleaner transportation and industrial technologies
- Increased use of renewable energy sources
- Stronger emissions regulations and pollution controls
- Reduced greenhouse gas emissions
- A healthier environment for future generations

What Would Community-Led Air Quality Standards Look Like?

- Residents helping shape environmental policies
- Community-based air quality monitoring and reporting
- Local knowledge guiding environmental priorities
- Greater transparency and accountability from decision-makers
- Protection of communities most affected by pollution
- Policies centered on residents' health and lived experiences

Looking Forward

- Cleaner air and reduced pollution
- Lower rates of pollution-related illness
- Stronger community participation
- Sustainable environmental policies
- Greater environmental justice and health equity



Transportation



What Would Equitable Transit Look Like?

- Reliable and affordable public transit for all residents
- Bus stops and rail stations within walking distance of homes
- Frequent and dependable service
- Safe, accessible transit stations
- Strong connections to jobs, schools, healthcare, and essential services
- Investments focused on historically underserved communities

What Would Sustainable Transportation Look Like?

- Less dependence on automobiles
- More opportunities for walking, biking, and public transit
- Safe sidewalks and protected bike lanes
- Well-connected transit networks
- Reduced traffic congestion
- Improved air quality and lower greenhouse gas emissions
- Healthier communities and more transportation choices



What Would Community-Led Transportation Planning Look Like?

- Residents involved in transportation planning and decision-making
- Projects shaped by local needs and priorities
- Community voices centered in development processes
- Investments that improve mobility without displacement
- Equitable distribution of transit benefits
- Greater transparency and accountability in planning

Looking Forward

- Equitable transit access
- Active transportation infrastructure
- Cleaner mobility options
- Community-driven planning
- Healthier, more connected neighborhoods



Food Access



What Would Equitable Food Access Look Like?

- Affordable, healthy food available in every neighborhood
- Grocery stores with fresh produce within walking distance
- More farmers' markets and local food options
- Community gardens that provide fresh food and strengthen neighborhoods
- Food pantries with flexible hours that accommodate working families
- Community feedback used to determine food needs and resource locations

Green Spaces



What Would Accessible Green Spaces Look Like?

- Parks, pocket parks, and community gardens within walking distance of homes
- More tree canopy to provide shade and reduce extreme heat
- Fruit-bearing trees that support both nutrition and cooling
- Safe, welcoming spaces for recreation and community gatherings
- Residents involved in designing and maintaining local green spaces
- Long-term city investment in upkeep and maintenance

Extreme Heat



What Would Community-Led Heat Planning Look Like?

- Residents help shape heat resilience strategies and priorities
- Solutions tailored to neighborhood-specific needs
- Support for staying safe at home during heat waves
- Free cooling units and utility bill assistance for vulnerable households
- Multilingual outreach and resources
- Long-term investments that address heat inequities rather than temporary fixes

RESOURCES FOR AIR QUALITY ISSUES IN SOUTH LA

How to report air quality issues in your local community:

Contact:

South Coast AQMD: Regulatory agency handling industrial pollution, dust, and odors in the South Coast Air Basin

- 24/7 availability at (1-800-288-7664)

**SO...
WHAT IS
BEING
DONE
TODAY?**



A localized, actionable strategy for funding local air monitoring in South LA.

AB 617 It unites local residents, environmental agencies, and air districts to pinpoint, track, and reduce harmful air pollution by industrial emissions.

Plans exist, but implementation is ongoing.... What YOU can do:

- Report pollution cases, as repeated complaints can trigger inspections or enforcement
- Get involved with local community organizations like SCLA Push or Communities for a Better Environment (CBE)
- Join the Community Steering Committee for AB 617
- Become Air Quality Ambassadors
- Participate in AB 617 planning meetings

TRANSPORTATION & MOBILITY RESOURCES

Metro LIFE Program:

Provides reduced-cost transit fares and transportation assistance for eligible low-income residents throughout Los Angeles County.

click me!

Metro Bike Share

A public bike-sharing system that offers affordable bicycle rentals and connections to transit stations, workplaces, and community destinations.

Rail-to-Rail Active Transportation Corridor

A multi-use walking and biking pathway connecting South Los Angeles communities and providing an alternative to automobile travel.

Metro Micro

An on-demand shared ride service that provides flexible transportation options in selected Los Angeles neighborhoods.

Vision Zero Los Angeles

A citywide traffic safety initiative focused on reducing pedestrian and cyclist injuries and deaths through safer street design and transportation planning.

K Line (Crenshaw/LAX Line)

Provides rail connections through South Los Angeles communities and improves access to jobs, schools, and regional destinations

FOOD & GREEN SPACE ACCESS, EXTREME HEAT: RESOURCES / COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

T.R.U.S.T. South LA

Members can help shape affordable housing decisions, participate in community projects and committees, support collective efforts to improve South LA, and vote for or serve as representatives on the organization's Board of Directors.

South LA Eco Lab

A community-led initiative that promotes climate resilience through green spaces, sustainable infrastructure, improved transportation, and environmental health improvements in South LA.

Stay up to date with news, events, community activities, and resources!

TreePeople:

Community Canopy Expansion

Explore volunteer opportunities near you!

See Which Free South LA Programs You Qualify For:



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