

How they did it: Angelenos win their first protected bike lane

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It's a story that Tinseltown could probably make magical: a dense, diverse and car-obsessed city turns a corner and decides to redesign an eight-lane thoroughfare to be great for biking, walking and public transit.

But until a team of community activists stepped in, Los Angeles' first protected bike lane project was at death's door. The two-month turnaround they engineered is a lesson in shoe-leather advocacy and broad-based coalition-building — and a reminder that though villains make for good storytelling, life is more complicated.

In two weeks, the city is expected to formally push the MyFigueroa project forward. Here's how the [Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition](#) and its allies saved the day.

1) They identified the silent skeptics



An official rendering of the MyFigueroa project. Image: City of Los Angeles.

[Conceived in 2010 based on a pair of public open houses](#), the "MyFigueroa" project would convert three of Figueroa Street's eight travel lanes to buffered and protected bike lanes in each direction, plus room for both quick-boarding bus platforms and parked cars in two other lanes.

For months, the public face of opposition to this plan was one man who owns eight [auto dealers](#) along Figueroa and was happy to discuss his business interests in the media.

"Will the 600 service customers who come into our [dealerships](#) every day find it easy to get to us with fewer traffic lanes?" Shammus Group CEO Darryl Holter [told LA Downtown News last fall](#). "I don't know. It's dicey."

Though there were [hints](#) that Holter might not be the only one driving skepticism of the project, [media reports](#) couldn't resist the poetry of a "bikes vs. cars" narrative, so when Holter [filed a legal appeal](#), he was easily cast as evil mastermind.

That's why LACBC volunteer Michael MacDonald was surprised to learn, in January, that the University of Southern California, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles and the California African American Museum were all behind the project delay, too.

MacDonald, who works as an architect, was listening in remotely to a meeting of a planning and land use management committee when it became clear that the institutions, as regular hosts of large events, were worried about auto congestion. Unlike Holter, they weren't publicly objecting to the project. But they wanted the city to do more traffic study, MacDonald said in an interview.

MacDonald knew that if the project was postponed again, its state funding was likely to expire.

"From the residential community and the smaller business community, there was a lot of support for the project," MacDonald said. "It seemed that we were going through a cycle of redesign on the project that might kill the project just through time frame alone."

Now that they understood the true arguments in [play](#), MacDonald and his colleagues swung into action.

2) They called the mayor's public commitments out



Future Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti at a ribbon-cutting event in 2010. Photo: [KCET Departures](#).

Half of LACBC's campaign to save Figueroa started at the top: LA's new Mayor Eric Garcetti.

Garcetti wasn't merely a public supporter of biking and urban placemaking. He had joined himself politically at the hip with MyFigueroa.

"His first executive directive was creating this [Great Streets Initiative](#)," said Eric Bruins, LACBC's planning and policy director. "This is basically the signature project. ... He presented this at an Urban Land Institute event with a rendering of this project behind him."

When MyFigueroa ["went off the rails" in January](#), Bruins said, Garcetti "had to get involved."

By that point, Streetsblog had already reported [Garcetti's statements about MyFigueroa](#). After the local councilmember, Curren Price, didn't block a 30-day delay in January, Bruins said, Garcetti's staff made it clear to Price and his colleagues that further delay would be bad for the project.

3) They rallied disadvantaged users to speak for themselves



Alexander Science Center School students testify in favor of a protected bike lane on Figueroa.
Photo: [LACBC](#).

"One of the things that's really exciting about living in Los Angeles is that we have probably one of the most diverse communities that uses biking as a mode of transportation," MacDonald said. "As a result, there's a really big community that we were able to reach out to."

LACBC created a [public Facebook event](#) for the 2:30 pm committee hearing on Figueroa and invited 2,100 people.

But they didn't stop there. MacDonald and two other volunteers also created Facebook events for every meeting of the four local neighborhood councils adjacent to Figueroa, to get them to publicly re-endorse the project. And they reached out to different sorts of institutions: Esperanza Community Housing, for one, which serves 126,000 people a year as a developer and manager of South Los Angeles affordable housing and of the popular [Mercado La Paloma](#), a restaurant incubator three blocks from Figueroa.

"A lot of people who utilize the Mercado are folks who function by public transportation, by bicycle and by foot," said Nancy Ibrahim, Esperanza's executive director. "A lot of the development in this

neighborhood has been going so far to separating — to making this community one where it's not particularly desirable or healthy to get out of your car."

Ibrahim sent a couple representatives of the Mercado to testify to the city. They were among more than 60 people who showed for the afternoon hearing, almost entirely in support of the project.



Photo: [LACBC](#).

"You have 60, 70, 80 people showing up at 2:30 in the afternoon at City Hall, each speaking for tens if not hundreds of people," Bruins said. "When the mayor coming from the top and the neighborhood councils from the bottom are both coming in and saying, 'let's move forward on this,' it allows the council members to realize that their constituents really do support this, and that the opponents are in the minority."

Nine weeks after hitting the brakes on the project, the committee [voted to move it forward](#). In a follow-up meeting in two weeks, they're expected to do so again, making the walking, biking and transit project all but certain.

For MacDonald, it's an affirmation of LACBC's effort.

"The MyFigueroa project is sort of the most forward-thinking of any streetscape project in the last 10 years or so in Los Angeles," Macdonald said. "There's a lot of projects that incorporate maybe some improvements to the sidewalk, maybe some improvements to the street trees, bike lanes. But this is one that has all those things."

*Hat tip to the [Alliance for Biking And Walking](#)'s weekly advocacy newsletter for calling our attention to the victory. **Correction 12:51 pm:** A previous version of this post referred to an out-of-date meeting agenda for the city's next action on Figueroa.*

[The Green Lane Project](#) is a PeopleForBikes program that helps U.S. cities build better bike lanes to create low-stress streets. You can follow us on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#) or sign up for our [weekly news digest](#) about protected bike lanes. Story tip? Write michael@peopleforbikes.org.