

San José's SoFA Pocket Park Project: Reclaiming and Revitalizing Surface Parking Space for Urban Agriculture

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1. Introduction

This is the story of a small but remarkable example of urban transformation in the nation's tenth-largest city. 540 South First Street in downtown San José, California—previously a 7,000-square foot, underutilized parking lot—has been remade into a vibrant, art-filled, urban agriculture-focused community space.

SoFA Pocket Park, as it is now known, opened in Summer 2021. “SoFA” borrows from the nickname of the South of First Area arts and entertainment district where the park is located. The park features raised planter beds where local residents can learn to grow their own food, a farm stand selling locally grown produce, pop-up food trucks, eight stunning textile-inspired murals by local artists, and a dog park. Now that the Pocket Park is open to the public, project stakeholders are launching community engagement efforts not only to raise awareness of the park but also to ensure that its design and programming are as welcoming and inclusive as possible. A concurrent set of objectives includes promoting the importance of urban agriculture as a component of fostering healthy communities while demonstrating how underutilized space previously dedicated to vehicles can be reclaimed for a community-serving purpose.

These community engagement efforts involve a collaboration between [MTI](#), [CommUniverCity](#), faculty and students in the [Department of Urban & Regional Planning](#) at San José State University, and [Veggielution](#).

2. Project Background

Community gardens such as those at the Pocket Park fill a great need for community gathering spaces that provide civic engagement opportunities. These gardens can operate as “third spaces”: unique places where people can relax and interact with others outside of the “primary spaces” of home and work.

Most urban residents are disconnected from where their food comes from, the work it takes to grow crops, and the process of delivering products to market. In many older urban cores, there is often scant green space—let alone publicly accessible, working gardens—to provide access to the freshest fruits and vegetables. Addressing this need in San José is Veggielution, a non-profit organization with a mission to “connect people from diverse backgrounds through food and farming to build community in East San José.”¹ Veggielution is part of the *Sí Se Puede* Collective of multiple San José organizations that foster neighborhood belonging, collective agency, and economic well-being for the city's underserved communities.

Veggielution's home is a six-acre community farm at Emma Prusch Park in eastern San José. In 2020 an exciting opportunity arose to expand operations into the core of the city at the invitation of the San José Downtown Association. The site of today's Pocket Park is owned by Urban Community, a local developer. Veggielution entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Urban Community for a three-year, temporary use of the site until the developer is ready to construct a permanent building on the site. Knowing that the Pocket Park is temporary, Veggielution designed the site's amenities, including planter boxes and raised garden beds, to be easily relocated.

Veggielution and its partners hope that a successful Pocket Park will create demand for additional urban agriculture sites in central San José in order to convert underutilized, redeveloping properties to productive, community-serving uses. The vision is for property owners and developers to benefit from the goodwill generated by loaning their land for a good cause, while local residents gain a safe gathering space with access to low-cost, fresh food.

3. Community Engagement to Raise Awareness of the Pocket Park

The Pocket Park is Veggielution's first venture outside of its east San José home, so it reached out to CommUniverCity, an organization with deep, trusted connections in the city's downtown neighborhoods. CommUniverCity San José (CUC) is a multi-sector partnership, as the three-part name implies, between local San José communities, San José State University, and the City of San José. Since its inception in 2005, CUC has focused its efforts on the underserved neighborhoods of central San José. These diverse communities are home to about 10 percent of the city's residents; 64 percent of the population is Hispanic, and about 45 percent of residents are foreign-born. CommUniverCity's programs impact low-and-moderate income residents living in neighborhoods near the university. In these areas, median household income (\$56,299) is 58 percent of the median income in the City of San José as a whole, and 40 percent of households earn less than \$50,000 per year. Nearly 85 percent of K-12 students in these communities are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. A significant percentage of K-12 students in the schools that partner with CUC perform below grade level in English and Math.²

Through CommUniverCity, a team of twelve urban planning graduate students, under the guidance of Professors Rick Kos, AICP and Gordon Douglas, PhD, started a process of community engagement to raise awareness of the Pocket Park. This engagement took a number of forms, including a detailed survey of residents in neighborhoods adjacent to the park and a series of programmed activities at the Pocket Park with funding and staff support from MTI. The following two sections describe these efforts.

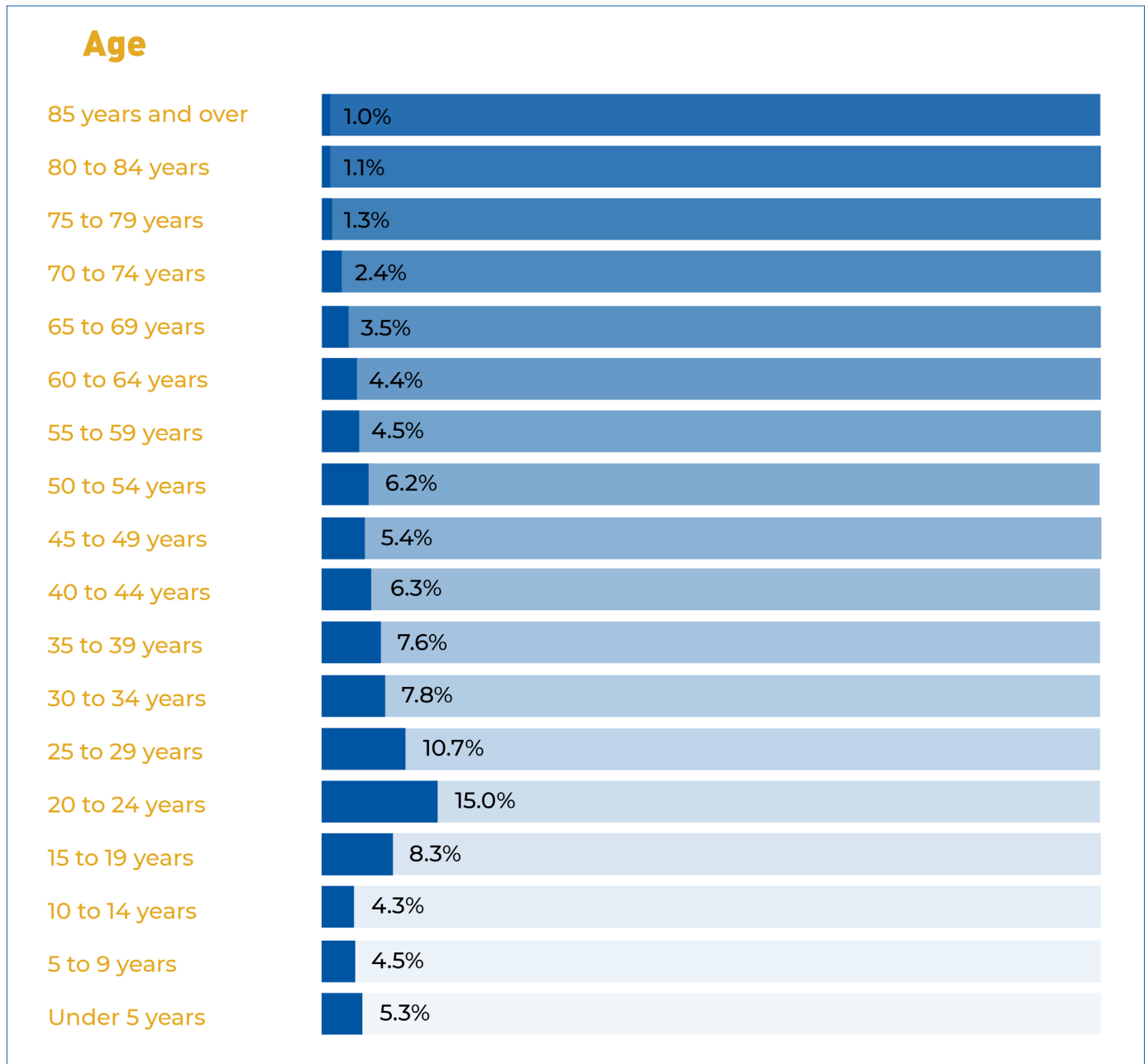
4. Study Area Characteristics Shaping Survey Design and Implementation

Collectively, the student team developed objectives for the survey, including questions to see if respondents are aware of the new park, how they currently obtain their fresh fruits and vegetables, and what amenities they find most important in public spaces such as city parks. The survey contained questions to identify information such as respondents' ZIP code, age, educational attainment, household income, and other demographic characteristics.

The students focused their outreach on two neighborhoods in closest proximity to the SoFA Pocket Park: South University and Guadalupe-Washington. Walking tours and aerial photo analysis

confirmed that these neighborhoods, with a combined approximate population of 15,000, are almost entirely devoid of public green space. The students then tapped into recent Census data to better understand the population in the study area.

Figure 1. Age demographics for Downtown San José residents as of 2020 according to Niche.com (<https://www.niche.com/places-to-live/n/downtown-san-jose-san-jose-ca/residents/>)



Guadalupe Washington is a historically working-class neighborhood with a thriving small business district along Willow Street (affectionately called “Calle Willow,” locally) and a strong, public cultural identity, which students saw expressed through murals and shops throughout the neighborhood.

This predominantly Hispanic-identifying neighborhood is becoming increasingly unaffordable, and many working-class residents face displacement. A majority of the households in Guadalupe Washington are low income, earning less than \$75,000 per year. The largest group of households (18.3%) has a household income of \$35,000 - \$50,000 compared to the citywide median of approximately \$85,000. The average household size is 4.2, relatively high for San José, and the median household income is \$53,267, less than half the county median. Educational attainment is relatively low: 41% of residents have no high school diploma, and 15% have completed college. The vast majority of housing, over 80%, is renter-occupied, even though most homes are single-family. Over half the residents are blue-collar (24%). The overwhelming majority of residents—over 80%—identify as Hispanic. Historically, Guadalupe Washington was a refuge for low income residents and recent immigrants, although it is no longer affordable for many working-class families; modest, decades-old single family homes have been selling for nearly \$1 million.³

The South University neighborhood is characterized by a low median age (24)—and correspondingly low household income—due to the preponderance of college students attending nearby San José State University. Eighty percent of housing units are renter-occupied.

The median household income is \$54,260, less than half the county median. Over 50 percent of the current population identifies as Hispanic. The neighborhood comprises primarily single-family homes with some interspersed mid-century multifamily apartment buildings.

Students researched the primary languages spoken in these communities and, as a result, created survey versions in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. A fourth version was rapidly developed by one of the students, fluent in Mandarin, after he overheard SoFA Pocket Park visitors speaking that language. The design of the survey reflects the objectives the student team felt would be of highest value to Veggielution. Specific sections were devoted to understanding respondent experiences with open spaces in San José, desired amenities in a new publicly-accessible park, awareness of the SoFA Pocket Park, expenditures on fruits and vegetables, and demographic characteristics of the respondent.

Figure 2. Students engage with participants at the SoFA Pocket Park entrance during San José’s popular Viva CalleSJ event. Photo: Matt Gustafson



5. Survey Findings

After vetting the survey with Veggielution, the graduate student team fanned out across the study area and promoted the survey via social media and at events hosted at the Pocket Park. Within a four-week period, the students collected 215 survey responses. The largest group of total survey respondents (40%) identify as Hispanic or Latino; this was followed by white⁴ (36%) and Asian (12%). Close to 10 percent of respondents said they identify with two or more races/ethnicities.

When analyzing the data, the student team divided the results according to geography: respondents residing within the Guadalupe Washington and South University neighborhoods closest to the park (45% of total surveys) and, separately, respondents residing in other neighborhoods (55%).

Characteristics of Renters. A large majority of study area respondents live in rental housing (84%). One of the more interesting findings was *how* respondents obtained their fresh produce: far more renters (62%) than homeowners (21%) indicated that they reach retailers via walking or public transportation.

Open Space Deficiency. Almost immediately, the surveys revealed a common theme: study area residents are in great need of safe spaces to relax, especially during evenings and weekends, and of spaces where children can play and explore. The two study area neighborhoods are almost completely devoid of green spaces, and the Pocket Park is clearly beginning to fill a substantial void. However, only 46 percent of study area respondents said that they were aware of the Pocket Park, likely because it opened recently.

Figure 3. San Jose State University graduate student Yu Chiao (standing) administers a survey inside the Pocket Park. Photo: Rina Horie

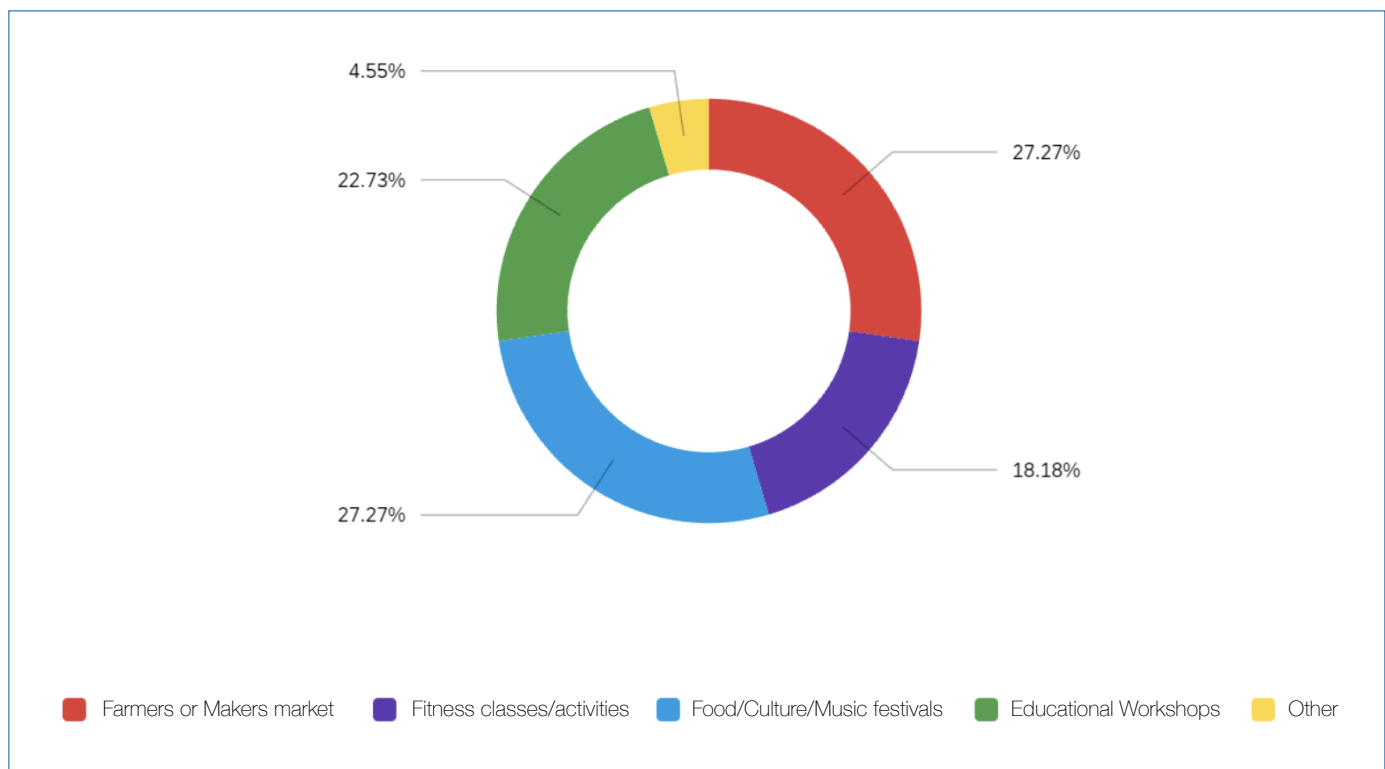


Fresh Produce Access in Lower-Income Households. Nearly one-third of survey respondents from the study area indicated that their household income was less than \$35,000 – roughly a third of respondents living in the study area reported living close to “extremely low income” or 30 percent

of the median household income for the City of San José, which is \$109,593 for households and \$40,993 for individuals. Filtering for respondents from households earning under \$50,000 annually (less than half of the citywide median) and who reported their fruits and vegetable spending, 61 percent spend at least \$40 a week on produce, and 29 percent were not always able to get enough produce. Especially relevant is the finding that 70 percent of respondents within the study area were able to get enough produce for their household when shopping, compared with 86 percent of respondents from more affluent neighborhoods outside the study area.

Desired Pocket Park Programming: Veggielution is particularly interested in knowing about programs they could offer to draw visitors to the park. Figure 4 shows the responses from all respondents, with farmers markets and cultural events with a food and music theme in demand.

Figure 4. Survey findings indicate residents' interest in programs/events to be hosted at or near SoFA Pocket Park.



Respondent Opinions of the Pocket Park. Additional findings from the survey of great interest to Veggielution include:

- 86% of respondents said that would visit the park “often” if it routinely offered fresh fruits and vegetables
- 85% of respondents indicated that they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the appearance and cleanliness of the park
- 91% of respondents said that the park will “positively” or “very positively” influence the surrounding neighborhoods.

6. K-12 Outreach - Workforce Development

With the goal of engaging a diverse group of community members, the research team proposed developing a youth engagement opportunity that would attract K-12 visitors to the SoFA Pocket Park. This opportunity would also allow students to explore the interconnectedness of community, urban, and transportation planning. With Veggielution already hosting community gatherings at the park from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m., the research team sought to augment the existing event with K-12 geared activities with funding and staffing support from MTI. Thus, two consecutive Friday after-school events were put together that would allow K-12 students to interact with the garden space and introduce them to other urban planning and transportation topics.

To recruit participation for the two K-12 geared events, the research team conducted extensive outreach to schools located in the Downtown San José area, including extending invitations to Gardner Elementary, Horace Mann Elementary, Lowell Elementary, Nativity Schools of San José, Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary, Washington Elementary, and Notre Dame High School. Flyers were distributed to the Downtown San José community and a broad social media campaign followed.

The first event welcomed students into the garden learning space where SJSU graduate students, staff, and Veggielution volunteers had set up stations where students could engage in different activities. Activities included:

1. **Lessons in gardening basics**, where students were encouraged to explore the Veggielution garden beds while listening to volunteers who explained basic horticulture, specifically skills that could lead to growing food at home. Visitors were then allowed to re-pot and take home a succulent of their own.
2. **Arts and crafts**, where students were encouraged to create posters that demonstrated sustainability and safe modes of active transportation. Elementary school students attending a Santa Clara County school were encouraged to participate in MTI's [Elementary Poster Contest](#). With the 2021 theme of "Stroll and Roll Back to School," the poster contest encourages 1st-6th graders to demonstrate their knowledge of active mode safety through an artistic, hands-on or digital medium. Prizes for the winning posters include: a class field trip or a class pizza or popsicle party as well as an individual cash prize for the winner.
3. [Place it! de James Rojas](#), where participants build a city landscape using miscellaneous household items, toys, and craft supplies. Under the guidance of James Rojas, an urban planner and community leader for over 20 years, participants created city landscapes inspired by a fond childhood memory.
4. All K-12 participants of each event received a Halloween goodie bag with temporary tattoos, pencils, a coloring page, an SJSU sticker, and healthy snacks.

Figure 5. Images of community members participating in the SoFA Pocket Park Exploration



The second event capitalized on the Halloween holiday and encouraged visitors to wear their Halloween costumes to the SoFA Pocket Park Exploration. Activities included:

1. **Lessons in gardening basics**, where students were encouraged to explore the Veggielution garden beds while listening to volunteers who explained basic horticulture, including the benefits of composting. Visitors were allowed to take home a small pumpkin of their choosing.
2. **Arts and crafts**, where youth were encouraged to create posters that demonstrated sustainability and safe modes of active transportation. Participants could also repurpose recycled clothing to create tug toys for the SoFA Pocket Park Dog Park visitors.



3. [Place It! de James Rojas](#).

4. **Spoken word poetry** readings.

5. All participants received a Halloween goodie bag with temporary tattoos, pencils, a coloring page, an SJSU sticker, and healthy snacks.

Figure 6. Two costumed participants learn about composting and gardening from a veggielution volunteer while holding earthworms.

While moving through each of the activity stations, the SJSU graduate students and Veggielution volunteers engaged in conversation with the youth, inquiring as to their participation in the park activities as well as encouraging discussion of university life. A total of 25-30 youth ranging in ages from 2-15 participated in the SoFA Pocket Park Exploration events.

Figure 7. Images of K-12 community members participating in the SoFA Pocket Park Exploration and SoFA Farmer’s Market.



7. Conclusion

The research team engaged an estimated 25-30 K-12 students in the SoFA Pocket Park Exploration. Their participation in hands-on activities allowed them to explore a variety of community engagement activities while also being exposed to foundational principles in community gardening, and urban and transportation planning. The added benefit of interacting with university students, some of which share their ethnic background, allowed these students to see themselves in a college or university setting in the future.

The survey of residents in surrounding communities produced similar positive results. The graduate student team was successful in raising awareness of the new park’s location and public-serving amenities. Veggielution and its project partners expect that the former parking lot eyesore will rapidly become a much-loved addition to the community. They also expect that more visitation to the SoFA Pocket Park will stimulate demand for more such temporary agricultural spaces as central San José continues its rapid evolution into a regional destination.

Endnotes

1. Veggielution website: <https://veggielution.org/>
2. CommUniverCity website: <https://cucs.j.org/>
3. “Final Community Needs Assessment of the Urban Demonstration Garden by Veggielution within Downtown San José’s South First Street Area (SoFA) District Pocket Park,” URBP 295 Capstone Studio in Community Planning Graduate Student team, San José State University, Department of Urban & Regional Planning, December, 2021.
4. “White” refers to the U.S. Census Bureau category: “White alone, not Hispanic or Latino.”

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