

MUNICIPAL INNOVATION CASE STUDY
City of Long Beach, California • Office of Climate Action and Sustainability • 2024–2025

Climate as Connection

Long Beach’s Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative in West and Central Long Beach

Long Beach’s Office of Climate Action and Sustainability used a Neighbor-to-Neighbor grant to activate parks, restore community traditions, and build social infrastructure in four high-need neighborhoods — delivering 65 events and engaging 6,700 participants, far exceeding its original goals of 50 events and 1,500 participants.

65	6,700	4	2	89K
EVENTS HOSTED (50 PLANNED)	PARTICIPANTS (1,500 PLANNED)	TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS	COMMUNITY TOOLKITS CREATED	RESIDENTS IN SERVICE AREA

Community Context and Challenge

West and Central Long Beach sit in the shadow of the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the busiest port complex in the Western Hemisphere. The I-710 freeway goods movement corridor runs directly through the area, and the American Lung Association has ranked this region the most ozone-polluted in the United States in 23 of the 24 years it has tracked air quality. The consequences are not abstract. Residents in these neighborhoods live up to 15 years fewer than residents in other parts of the same city.

SERVICE AREA PROFILE

Top 25% of disadvantaged communities per CalEnviroScreen 4.0
Nearly half the area in the top 10% of most disadvantaged communities
~89,000 residents across a 5-square-mile area
Reduced life expectancy up to 15 years vs. other parts of the city
Located adjacent to the Ports of LA/Long Beach and the I-710 corridor
Most ozone-polluted region in the U.S. for 23 of 24 years (American Lung Association)
The four target neighborhoods, Central/Wrigley, Willmore/Washington, Westside, and Upper Westside, form a contiguous five-square-mile area home to roughly 89,000 residents, the majority of whom are people of color. Nearly half the area scores in the top 10% of California’s most disadvantaged communities per CalEnviroScreen 4.0, a designation that reflects not just pollution

burden but the accumulated effects of decades of systemic underinvestment in housing, education, employment, and public health.

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated social fractures. Community events declined sharply. The informal ties that hold neighborhoods together, the casual encounters at parks, the shared traditions around holiday events, the routines of older adults who rely on recreation centers for social connection, weakened or disappeared. When the pandemic ended, the social infrastructure did not automatically return.

Long Beach had also developed a Climate Action Plan with measurable improvements targeting neighborhoods facing the greatest environmental burdens. The challenge was transforming these commitments into tangible experiences for residents, moving beyond policy documents and toward collaborative, actionable engagement.

Program Design

In 2024, the City of Long Beach was awarded a Neighbor-to-Neighbor grant administered through California Volunteers and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research. The grant funded a program called ConnectingLB Neighbors, led by the Office of Climate Action and Sustainability in collaboration with the Department of Parks, Recreation & Marine, and City Fabrick, a community-based nonprofit with deep roots in West Long Beach's civic life.

The program's design rested on a deliberate framing choice: climate action would not be the subject of lectures, but the occasion for neighbors to gather. Rather than convening residents to hear about climate resilience, the program would invite them to practice it, by planting trees together, restoring a park, cataloging local wildlife, or learning to mend a garment rather than discard it. Social connection and environmental action were designed to be inseparable.

Three goals organized the work: create spaces for neighbors to connect and strengthen relationships; provide opportunities for residents to participate in volunteer initiatives that address community needs; and deepen residents' relationships with their local parks and public spaces through active stewardship. From the outset, the program committed to free, accessible programming, no cost to attend any event, in a community where economic barriers routinely limit civic participation.

Resident Engagement Strategy

— Community Listening as Program Design

Before finalizing the event calendar, the program administered a ConnectingLB survey in each of the four neighborhoods to ask residents what they actually wanted. Rather than delivering a

predetermined program, the City presented a menu of event types and used survey results to refine and prioritize programming. This design-by-listening approach meant that at least four events per round were specifically tailored to what that community's residents had asked for, not what a planner assumed they wanted.

The slow fashion programming series offers a clear example of this responsiveness in practice. What began as a modest set of scheduled events grew organically as in-person attendance and social media engagement signaled strong community interest. The program responded by expanding the series: mending classes, sewing and upcycling workshops, a clothes swap, a mending café, and a custom embroidery station at a block party. Residents drove the expansion, and the program's flexibility allowed it to follow.

— **Multilayered Outreach for a Multilingual Community**

Long Beach's West and Central neighborhoods are linguistically and culturally diverse, and the program's outreach strategy reflected this diversity. Small workshops achieved the best attendance when promoted via social media. Large park events required in-person outreach, flyers at recreation centers and libraries and door-to-door canvassing, as well as digital promotion. Partner organizations extended the program's reach by sharing events through their channels. Major event materials were translated into the community's most widely used languages, and one popular musical event featured live sign language interpretation. The program approached accessibility as a core engagement strategy: minimizing barriers consistently increased participation.

— **Reviving What the Community Had Lost**

Some of the program's most effective engagement came from restoring rather than inventing. Mobile Recess, a popular parks program that emerged during COVID to provide families with outdoor play opportunities, had faded as emergency conditions ended. ConnectingLB brought it back. Holiday park events that were at risk of cancellation due to budget constraints were saved by the grant and returned to the community. The Older Americans Month series, run in partnership with the City's senior center, specifically created outdoor social opportunities for older adults who had become increasingly isolated in post-pandemic years. None of these required elaborate new programming; they required a budget and a commitment to show up where the community already expected to gather.

Implementation

Across 2024 and 2025, the program delivered 65 events, 30% more than the 50 originally planned, spanning six broad focus areas:

FOCUS AREA	REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES
Climate Action	Wildlife cataloguing, ecology walks, restoration days at Willow Springs Park, climate workshops, tree planting
Slow Fashion & Craft	Mending classes, sewing & upcycling, clothes swap, mending café, custom embroidery station
Outdoor & Active	Mobile Recess, park block parties, bike/pedestrian events, community wildlife walks
Arts & Culture	Eco-poetry, phytogram workshops, art events at Museum of Latin American Art
Intergenerational	Older Americans Month series (AAPI celebration, movie night, country fair), “Climate Superheroes” for kids, senior center partnership events
Holiday & Celebration	Halloween carnival (Silverado Park), holiday events (rescued from budget cuts)

Events were distributed across all four target neighborhoods, with the greatest concentration in Central/Wrigley, which includes Willow Springs Park, the city’s distinctive restoration park with wetlands and native plantings that served as an anchor location for ecological programming. Parks and outdoor spaces were the most popular venues, drawing the largest attendance and fostering spontaneous neighbor-to-neighbor interaction that enclosed spaces rarely replicate.

Small, hands-on workshops proved to be the program’s most reliable format for relationship building. Sewing classes, mending cafés, poetry sessions, and phytogram-making created low-pressure, side-by-side working environments where conversation emerged naturally from shared activity. These settings were particularly effective for youth and families, who responded more consistently to making and creating than to lecture or information formats. The workshops became a model that the program leaned into rather than away from as the program period progressed.

The program also made a deliberate investment in lasting infrastructure alongside its event programming. The Office of Climate Action and Sustainability commissioned two community-specific toolkits: a guide to hosting a block party and a climate action opportunities guide, both available in print and digital formats at lbcity.info/n2n. N2N volunteers developed a Long Beach Climate Action-themed board game for release in early 2026. Physical infrastructure investments included a high-capacity watering trailer for ongoing care of newly planted trees, sewing machines for the public library system, and native plantings across the service area. These were designed to serve the community long after the grant period ended.

— Navigating Structural Barriers

The program operated under two significant constraints that merit acknowledgment. First, the grant expressly prohibited funding for food at events, a provision the City challenged directly in its grant application, citing state planning documents that specifically identify food, transportation, and childcare as best practices for equitable community engagement in low-income communities. The lack of food at events limited participation, particularly in a community where many residents weigh practical trade-offs when deciding whether to attend a free event.

Second, the program period coincided with heightened U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity in surrounding neighborhoods. This visibly affected turnout at some events, increased hesitancy to sign in, and likely underreported the program’s engagement numbers. The City documented this candidly. Any practitioner deploying neighbor-to-neighbor programming in immigrant communities should anticipate this dynamic and factor it into both outreach strategy and outcome reporting.

Outcomes and Impact

Against every measurable target, the program exceeded its planned outcomes by a substantial margin:

METRIC	PLANNED	ACHIEVED	RESULT
Community events hosted	50	65	+30%
Total participants engaged	1,500	~6,700	+347%
Target neighborhoods served	3	4	Expanded
Community toolkits published	0	2	New asset
Lasting physical infrastructure	—	Trees, trailer, sewing machines	Permanent

Planned figures from the ConnectingLB grant application (February 2024). Achieved figures from program reports.

The 4.5x overperformance in participation, 6,700 residents engaged against a target of 1,500, is the most striking outcome. It reflects both the program’s expansion beyond its original event count and the decision to pursue large-scale outdoor programming that consistently attracted higher attendance than the workshops the original projections anticipated.

The program’s lasting infrastructure investments represent a different category of outcome: not a count of people who attended an event, but a set of community assets that remain functional after the grant ends. The block party toolkit and climate action guide provide residents with a practical resource for organizing their own neighbor-to-neighbor activities independently of City programming. The watering trailer supports the long-term viability of tree plantings that would otherwise struggle to maintain themselves. The library’s sewing machines extend the slow fashion programming’s reach into an institution that residents access year-round.

The program also restored civic events that would otherwise have been canceled, a form of preservation that does not appear in a tally of new outcomes but is meaningfully significant to the neighborhoods that would have lost them.

Lessons for Other Communities

01 Climate action is an effective entry point for community connection – if the programming is tangible.

Long Beach's most successful programming framed environmental action not as a topic to learn about but as an activity to do together: planting a tree, restoring a wetland, mending clothing, building a compost pile. When residents engaged in climate resilience as shared physical labor rather than as shared information, participation increased and relationships formed more naturally. Cities with existing climate action commitments should consider whether those commitments can serve as programming anchors for social connection, not just policy goals.

02 Restoration outperforms invention: find what the community has already lost.

Mobile Recess, holiday park events, and older adult programming, some of the program's strongest engagement came not from new ideas but from reviving traditions disrupted by COVID or budget cuts. Before designing new programming, ask what the community used to have but no longer has. Restoration carries civic legitimacy that entirely new initiatives have to earn.

03 Small hands-on workshops generate a deeper connection than large informational events.

Across six programming categories, the formats that consistently produced the strongest engagement and most meaningful neighbor-to-neighbor interaction were small, skill-based, side-by-side activities: sewing, mending, poetry, and ecology. These formats lower social stakes, sustain attention over time, and create natural conversation through shared focus. Cities designing connection programs should weigh these formats intentionally rather than defaulting to large-format events with higher headline numbers.

04 Follow community demand when it appears – even if it wasn't in the original plan.

The slow fashion series was not central to the program's original design. Community interest, expressed both in-person and on social media, made it one of the program's most successful threads. The program's responsiveness, expanding the series as demand grew, was only possible because the team had built enough flexibility into their planning to act on what they were hearing. Survey-driven program design is only valuable if the program can actually adjust in response.

05 Acknowledge the real barriers to participation in immigrant communities.

The program's candid documentation of how ICE activity affected attendance and sign-in rates is a practitioner contribution that deserves wider circulation. Neighbor-to-neighbor programs in immigrant neighborhoods face a participation barrier that surveys, flyers, and translated marketing cannot overcome: fear. Effective programming in these communities requires thinking beyond

event logistics to trust, working with trusted local organizations, being explicit about data practices, and accepting that official attendance figures will underrepresent actual engagement. The lessons section of Long Beach’s program also explicitly recommended deeper in-person outreach as a complement to digital strategies, a lesson directly relevant to reaching residents who are not on social media or who are hesitant to engage with City-branded communications.

06 Design for permanence from the start.

The toolkits, board game, watering trailer, and sewing machines were not afterthoughts. They were intentional investments in the program. Cities running time-limited grants should build a “what remains?” question into their program design from the beginning, distinguishing between activities that generate participation during the grant period and assets that continue to serve the community after the grant ends.

Conclusion

Long Beach’s ConnectingLB program offers a model for cities that want to do two things at once: advance an environmental agenda and rebuild the social fabric of communities that have been systematically underinvested. The insight at the core of the program is simple but not obvious: climate action and social connection are not competing priorities. In the right hands, each can serve as the mechanism for the other.

The program’s overperformance, 65 events, 6,700 participants, infrastructure that outlasts the grant, reflects both a well-designed program and a genuine appetite for connection in West and Central Long Beach. Residents showed up in numbers far exceeding expectations because the programming met them where their interests already were: in their parks, at their crafting tables, at their community celebrations. The program did not try to manufacture demand; it followed it.

For city managers and sustainability officers designing community engagement in high-need neighborhoods, Long Beach’s experience suggests a replicable framework: start with what the community has told you it wants, anchor programming in the physical spaces residents already use, design for hands-on doing rather than passive attending, build something that remains when the event is over, and be honest, in your documentation and your planning, about the structural barriers that no amount of good programming can fully overcome.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

LEAD AGENCY City of Long Beach Office of Climate Action and Sustainability

PARTNER AGENCIES Department of Parks, Recreation & Marine; Department of Health and Human Services; City Fabrick (community-based organization)

TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS Central/Wrigley, Willmore/Washington, Westside, Upper Westside

PROGRAM CONTACT Larry Rich, Sustainability Manager • larry.rich@longbeach.gov • 562-570-5839

RESOURCES lbcity.info/n2n (block party toolkit, climate action guide, and program information)

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