

Little Saigon

Cultural District Designation

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Harris Rosenblum

Robert Keatinge

Rafael Fontes

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I. City Heights Background

A. History

The community now known as City Heights began to form in the 1880's when 240 acres of unincorporated land were purchased by Abraham Klauber and Samuel Steiner for the purposes of land development. The area sat 400 feet above level and was thus named "City Heights." (San Diego History, 1983). By 1912 in anticipation of the Panama-California International Exposition, voters elected to have City Heights incorporated into the City of East San Diego, causing the City Heights name to fade. A massive population boom in the region quickly followed and the increasing financial burden of developing city services caused the City of East San Diego to cease existence on December 31, 1923. At this time the City of East San Diego was annexed into the City of San Diego, and the City Heights name was restored (City Heights Town Council, n.d.).

City Heights from the 1930s to the 1950s was a major commercial center. The main commercial streets of El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue were home to major retailers and the area prospered until the late 1950s when retailers begin following residents to new suburban communities (City Heights Town Council, n.d.). City Heights then fell into a period of economic decline, which created a more accessible real estate market for refugees who first began arriving from Vietnam in 1975.



Source: City Heights Town Council

I. City Heights Background

A. History



Source: San Diego Free Press

From the 1970s and continuing to today, refugee communities have arrived in City Heights from the world over. In the 1980s communities from Eastern Europe and Ethiopia arrived. In the 1990s those from Somalia, Sudan, and Liberia also settled. In the last two decades, refugees from Iran, Iraq, and Burma have made City Heights their home.

While social links in City Heights remain strong, the neighborhood has had to address a number of physical barriers. In the 1980s the urban fabric of City Heights was torn by freeway development. Crime began to escalate and public facilities decayed. In the 1990s Price Philanthropies began to develop its Urban Village revitalization project and a new City Heights police substation opened in 1996. While crime has fallen, other indicators of inequity remain.

I. City Heights Background

B. Demographics Of Overall Community

- The Population of City Heights in 2016 was 102,593. This comprised 7.3% of the City of San Diego's population of 1,406,622.
- The Density of City Heights in the same period was 17,586 people per square mile. This was more than 4 times the City of San Diego average of 4,337 people per square mile.
- The Median Household Income of City Heights was \$39,647, 45% less than the City of San Diego average of \$71,481.
- Median Rent in City Heights was \$1,000 per month for a 1-bedroom apartment, 30% less than the City of San Diego average of \$1,466 per month.
- The Average Household Size in City Heights is 6.9 people per household, more than double the City of San Diego average of 2.8 people per household.
- The percentage of foreign-born residents in City Heights is 39.8%, compared to 26.7% for the City of San Diego
- The Poverty Rate is 29.9%, more than double that of the City of San Diego at 13.1%

City Heights / San Diego

Population (2016)	102,593 / 1,406,622
Density (People/Sq Mile)	17,586 / 4,337
Median Household Income	\$39,647 / \$71,481
Median Rent	\$1,000 / \$1,466
Average Household Size (Persons)	6.9 / 2.8
Foreign-Born	39.8% / 26.7%
Poverty Rate	29.9% / 13.1%

Source: CityData

II. Background on CA Cultural District Designation

A. What is the designation?

Per their own definition, “the California Arts Council’s cultural districts program aims to assist Californians in leveraging the state’s considerable assets in the areas of culture, creativity, and diversity. A cultural district is generally understood as a well-defined geographic area with a high concentration of cultural resources and activities.”

As we understand it, cultural districts can work to foster tourism and economic development, while encouraging community resiliency in the face of challenges with respect to growth and change. Chief among these is the specter of gentrification which, when combined with the rising cost of living generally, stands to displace artists and working communities. This threat is especially acute in urban areas, which constitute 8 out of the 14 districts designated as part of the first round of applications in 2014

Current examples of designated districts, both local and statewide, include Barrio Logan in San Diego, Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, along with Calle 24 and SOMA Philipinas in San Francisco.

Owing to its proximity and history of resiliency in the face of urban stressors and institutional antagonism, Barrio Logan should especially be looked at as a case study.



II. Background on CA Cultural District Designation

B. Scope of Work

Our client in this case is the City Heights Economic Development Collaborative.

Owing to the stated purposes of leveraging California's diversity, advancing communities through the arts, and fostering initiatives that reflect diverse communities, we think that Little Saigon, and by extension greater City Heights, merits assessment.

C. Research Methodology

- Our site visits
 - Photography & Observation
- Stakeholder interviews
 - Business owners, Non-profit organizations, City staff,
 - Neighborhood council, Academics, Local artists, Community members
- Research Synthesis
 - Analyzed various publicly available databases and previous planning efforts surrounding the corridor.



Source: City Heights Business Association



II. Background on CA Cultural District Designation

D. Other types of districts.

While the cultural district is an important goal to pursue, the walkability measures used to assess their efficacy (especially for districts defined as “urban”) can be met with other place-based policy tools.

Planning Districts - A planning district is an area defined by a certified local government which, through its unique formal qualities, merits special consideration with respect to any urban planning decisions that may affect it. In some ways, it’s like a historic district but generally more flexible in terms of what changes are allowed to happen.

Benefit Assessment District - Benefit Assessments are used by local governments to pay the costs of providing fire suppression, flood control and other services to a particular community. These charges are based on the concept of assessing only those properties that directly benefit from the services or improvements financed. Because these charges are based on specific benefit, they are not subject to Proposition 13 limitations.

Enhanced Infrastructure Financing Districts - An EIFD can finance traditional public works, such as transportation, transit, parks and libraries, water and sewer facilities, solid waste disposal, and flood control and drainage. The legislation emphasizes projects that support sustainable community goals, energy efficiency, and reducing the carbon footprint of California’s economy.



III. Individual Site Analysis

A. Why We Selected It

Sitting down for an hour or two at A Chau Restaurant on El Cajon Boulevard and Menlo Avenue demonstrates the fact that Little Saigon is a vibrant center of culture, commerce, and community. It acts as a home not just for the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American community throughout San Diego, but for other communities across City Heights.

San Diego designated Little Saigon as a cultural district in 2013 (City Heights Life, 2013). This action helped to set up these six blocks along El Cajon Boulevard as the best case-study for City Heights on the impacts a cultural district may have on a place. Simultaneously, the city level designation increases the viability of a possible state-level designation.

More Importantly, Little Saigon may serve as an avenue for connecting the newer refugee communities within City Heights as a whole. If the long-term goal seeks to build a cultural district for the entirety of City Heights, then finding a connection to diversity is key to its success.

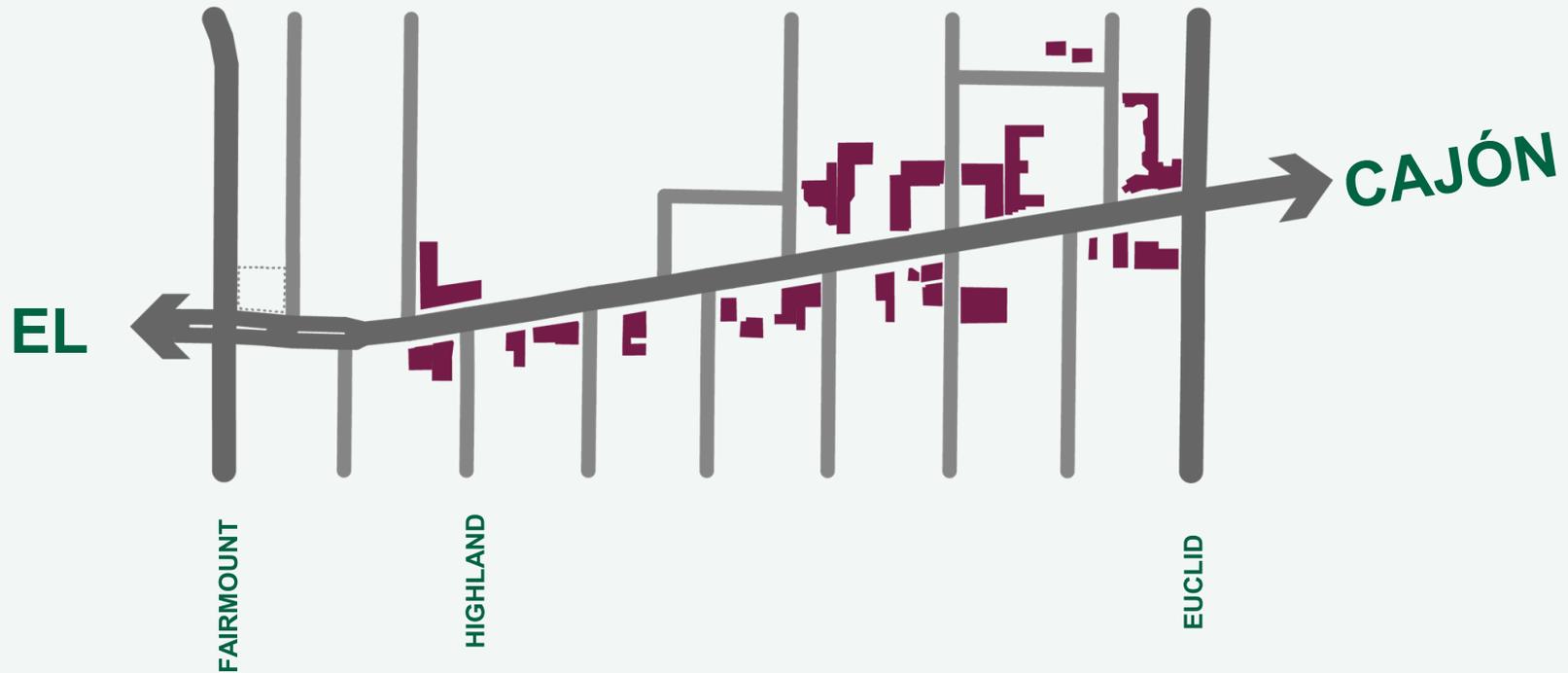


III. Individual Site Analysis

B. Geography / Boundaries

Little Saigon, according to the City designation, sits between Highland Avenue and Euclid Avenue along El Cajon Boulevard. While it appears to solely occupy the geographic northern border of City Heights, the true boundaries stretch more broadly in all directions. Specifically, further south down Euclid reaching towards University.

Ideally, the state designation should consider enlarging the currently defined boundaries. Stretching further east and west along El Cajon, as well as further south towards University to capture more of the nearby assets that both relate to Little Saigon and connect to City Heights' distinct image.



III. Individual Site Analysis

C. Demographics and Trends

Age

Age skews older in Little Saigon. Older populations are more vulnerable to the negative health outcomes associated with poor walkability, limited shade coverage, and toxic air quality. Therefore, interventions that address these issues should be prioritized.

Providing economic stability may help older populations age in place more comfortably and successfully. However, the largest age cohort, 25-34 (about 17% of the population), requires a different set of priorities that need to be addressed, such as social and economic mobility.

The impacts of an aging population on the future of Little Saigon must be considered. It may add credence to the importance of cementing the area as a cultural district, as this community becomes more and more assimilated and future generations move away.

Race/Ethnicity

Only 47.2% of the population is white, whereas San Diego as a whole is 58.9% white. 25.6% are Asian. About 96% of the Asian population is Vietnamese, about 3% is Chinese, and the remaining 1% is Taiwanese.

Total population	5,205
Median age	33.5 Years
Income per capita	\$13,932
Median household income	\$27,050
Under federal poverty line	29.2%
Percent renter-occupied	93% renter
Race / Ethnicity	47.2% White 14.6% Black 25.6% Asian 5.5% 2 or More
Unemployment rate	10.5%

Source: ACS 5-year estimate 2017

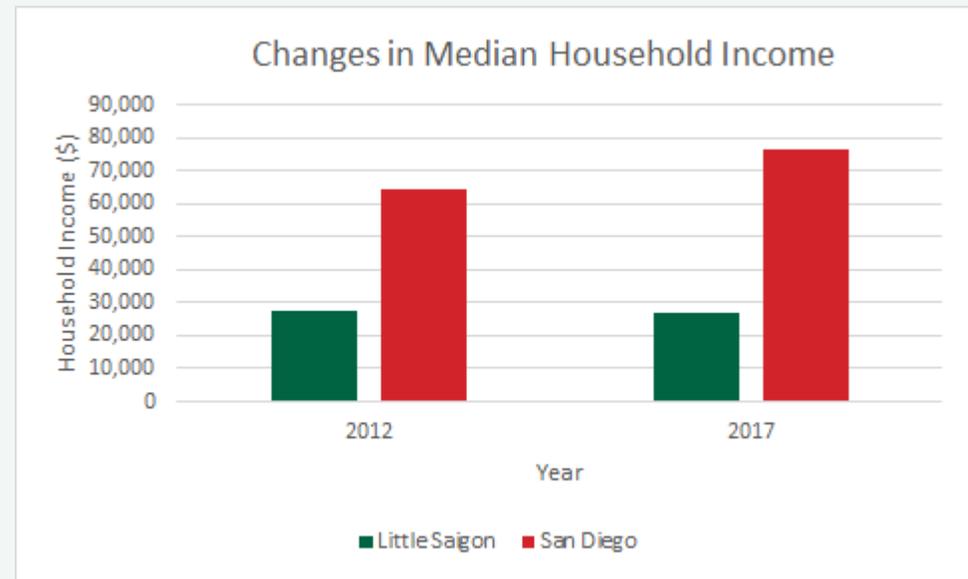
III. Individual Site Analysis

Educational Attainment and Household Income

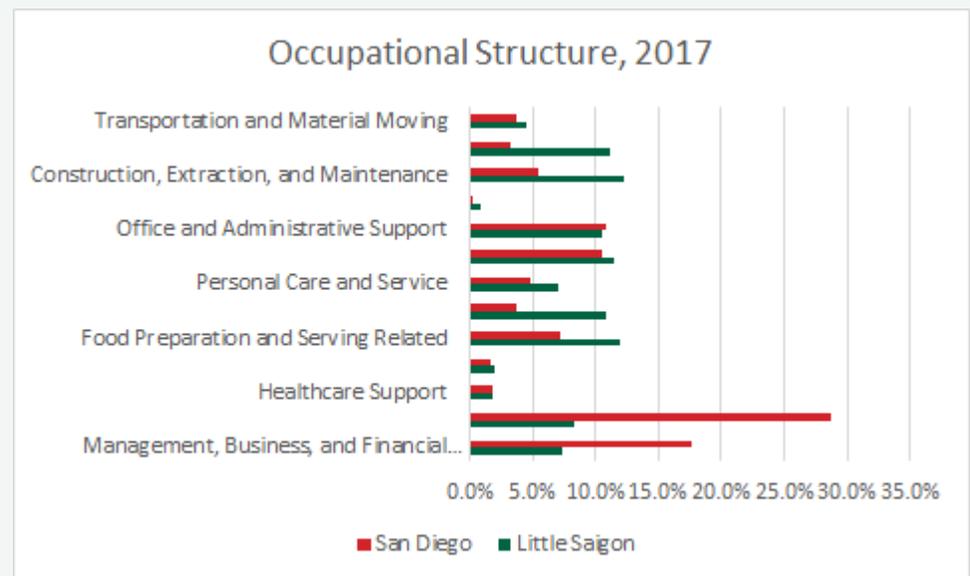
Educational attainment is limited. 40.2% of the population 25 years and older have less than a High School education. However, this number seems to be growing. In 2012 only 8.7% had bachelor’s degrees, whereas in 2017 that percentage doubled to 16.9%. Similar gains, however, were not realized in median household income during this time period, staying around \$27,000, almost \$50,000 below the median household income for San Diego.

Key Work Sectors

Type of occupation is split relatively evenly. Food preparation and serving related jobs, sales, and construction-related work have the largest worker percentages. Occupational tracks and economy provide less mobility and lower pay than professional and businesses heavy industries carrying San Diego. This helps explain the discrepancy in median household income. The occupational structure in Little Saigon aligns similarly to other communities within City Heights as well. Looking at ways to increase the variety and number of well-paying jobs in and around Little Saigon should also be considered throughout City Heights as a whole.



Source: ACS 5-year estimate 2012, 2017



Source: ACS 5-year estimate 2017

III. Individual Site Analysis

Health

Residents in Little Saigon have less health insurance coverage than both San Diego and City Heights. Additionally, of those who have insurance, far more utilize Public Health Insurance rather than private. Disaggregating the data and viewing health insurance by age, we see a clearer picture of where the disparities lie. Children under 18 and adults approaching the age of 65 in Little Saigon have fairly similar health insurance coverage to San Diego, due to Medicaid, CHIP, and Medicare. Some of the discrepancies in health insurance rates can be explained by lack of coverage through jobs. Ensuring that economic programming efforts help combat this low coverage would have tremendous impacts on the health and well-being of the community, only adding to the viability of the area as a potential state-level cultural district.

Health Insurance	San Diego	City Heights	Little Saigon
No Health Insurance Coverage	10.4%	21.2%	23.0%
With Health Insurance Coverage:	89.6%	78.8%	77.0%
Type of Health Insurance	San Diego	City Heights	Little Saigon
Public Health Coverage	29.3%	48.0%	58.2%
Private Health Insurance	69.1%	35.2%	23.7%

Age	San Diego	City Heights	Little Saigon
Population Under 18:			
No Health Insurance Coverage	5.3%	7.7%	4.7%
With Health Insurance Coverage:	94.7%	92.3%	95.3%
Public Health Coverage	33.8%	71.8%	88.9%
Private Health Insurance	64.0%	23.4%	14.2%

Age	San Diego	City Heights	Little Saigon
Population 18 to 24:			
No Health Insurance Coverage	16.0%	30.1%	32.5%
With Health Insurance Coverage:	84.0%	69.9%	67.6%
Public Health Coverage	15.7%	30.3%	44.3%
Private Health Insurance	70.1%	41.9%	23.3%

Age	San Diego	City Heights	Little Saigon
Population 25 to 34:			
No Health Insurance Coverage	16.2%	34.8%	44.6%
With Health Insurance Coverage:	83.8%	65.3%	55.4%
Public Health Coverage	13.7%	24.6%	25.0%
Private Health Insurance	72.8%	42.5%	32.0%

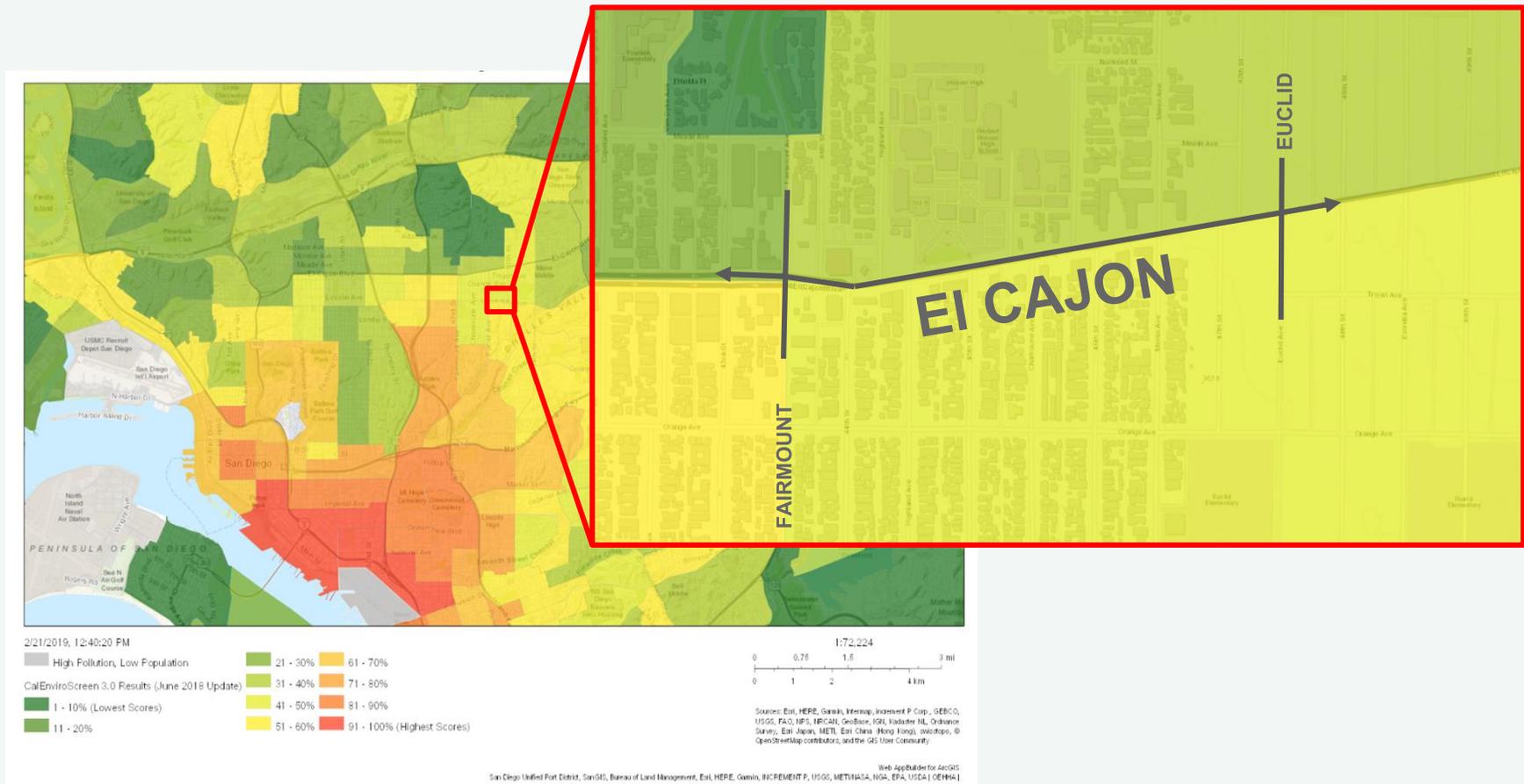
Age	San Diego	City Heights	Little Saigon
Population 35 to 64:			
No Health Insurance Coverage	11.9%	26.8%	27.6%
With Health Insurance Coverage:	88.1%	73.2%	72.4%
Public Health Coverage	16.7%	36.0%	47.2%
Private Health Insurance	75.1%	40.4%	30.2%

Age	San Diego	City Heights	Little Saigon
Population 65 or Older:			
No Health Insurance Coverage	1.6%	4.9%	2.6%
With Health Insurance Coverage:	98.4%	95.1%	97.4%
Public Health Coverage	93.9%	89.6%	95.8%
Private Health Insurance	54.3%	31.7%	9.8%

Source: ACS 5-year estimate 2017)

III. Individual Site Analysis

Air Quality



Source: CalEnviroScreen 3.0

According to CalEnviroScreen, the census tract surrounding Little Saigon sits between the 40th and 45th percentile, meaning its pollution burden is better than around 55 to 60% of census tracts in California. However, looking specifically at PM 2.5 and Diesel pollutant levels, the percentiles change to 53rd and 74th respectively. This can partially be explained by the intensity that El Cajon Boulevard is used by vehicles throughout the day for both commercial and local purposes. A number of interventions, such as improving multi-modal transportation access, improving walkability, and increasing tree and vegetation canopy can help reduce these harmful pollutants.

III. Individual Site Analysis

D. Streetscape + Walkability

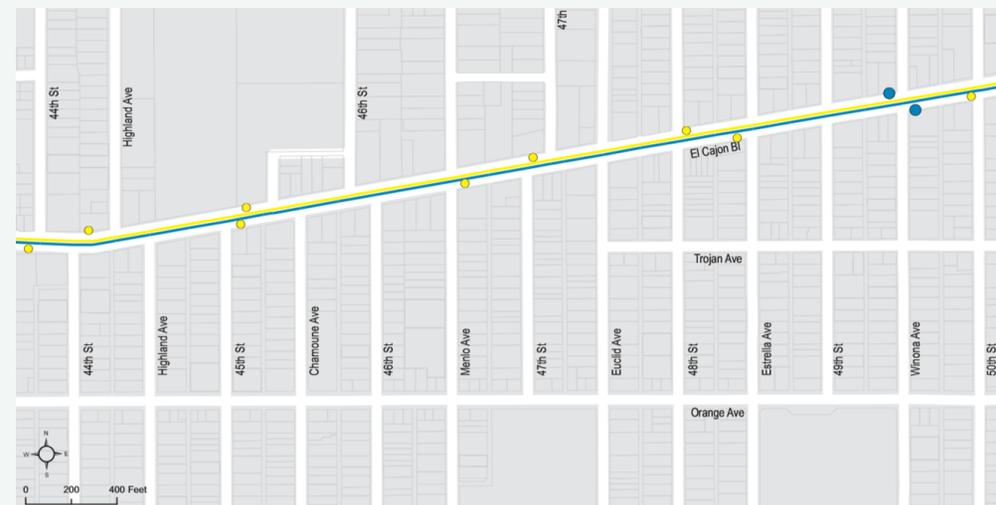
Overall, Little Saigon feels like a number of commercial strips pushed together. Despite the heavy concentration of Vietnamese owned businesses and restaurants, it has relatively few visual connections linking the corridor together. Signage, lighting, and a few scattered design interventions give a sense of what a more cultural district may look like. Food-related businesses, such as restaurants, markets, and bakeries, drive the cultural connection and could be used as a pathway to enhance the user experience and understanding of the area.

Walkability is hampered by a lack of high-quality crosswalks, wayfinding, and shade. A number of intersections lack crosswalks entirely, which increases the risk of serious and fatal auto-related crashes and discourages walking (City of San Diego, 2016).

Similarly, transit access is limited, only Local Bus Route 1 and Rapid Bus Route 215 run through the corridor. Route 1 has stops within Little Saigon. All bus stops lack shade.



Source: Harris Rosenblum



Existing Public Transportation Routes and Stops

- Rapid Bus Route 215
- Local Bus Route 1
- Rapid Bus Stop
- Local Bus Stop

Source: San Diego Metropolitan Transportation System (2015)

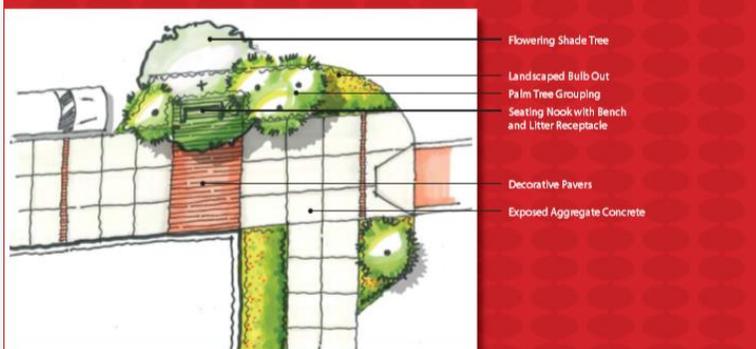
III. Individual Site Analysis

According to crash data provided by the City between 2009 and 2013, two traffic related fatalities, 118 injuries, and a total of 188 crashes occurred within 100 feet of El Cajon Boulevard (2016). Additionally, they found that nearly two thirds (64%) of crashes were intersection related. Crashes between pedestrians and cars are entirely preventable. Providing streetscape improvements, such as strategically placed bulbouts and street trees, will reduce car speeds, and enhance visibility, inevitably reducing the number of crashes along the corridor.

Figure 3-11 | Crash Location Map (Years 2009-Oct.2013)

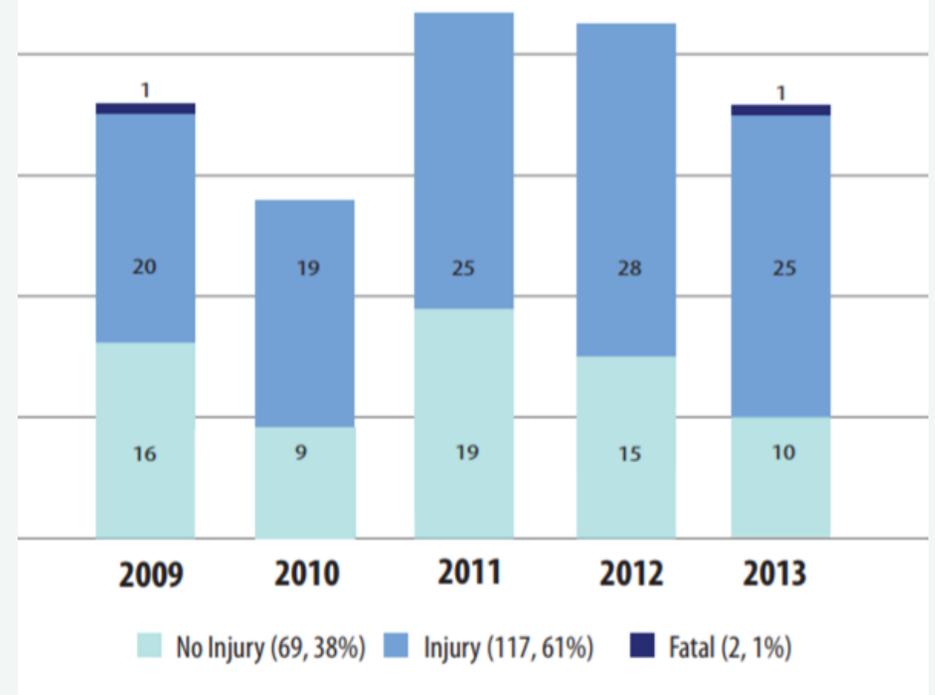


Conceptual bulb out locations



Source: Little Saigon Design Guidelines

Figure 3-10 | Annual Crash Counts and Severity Distribution



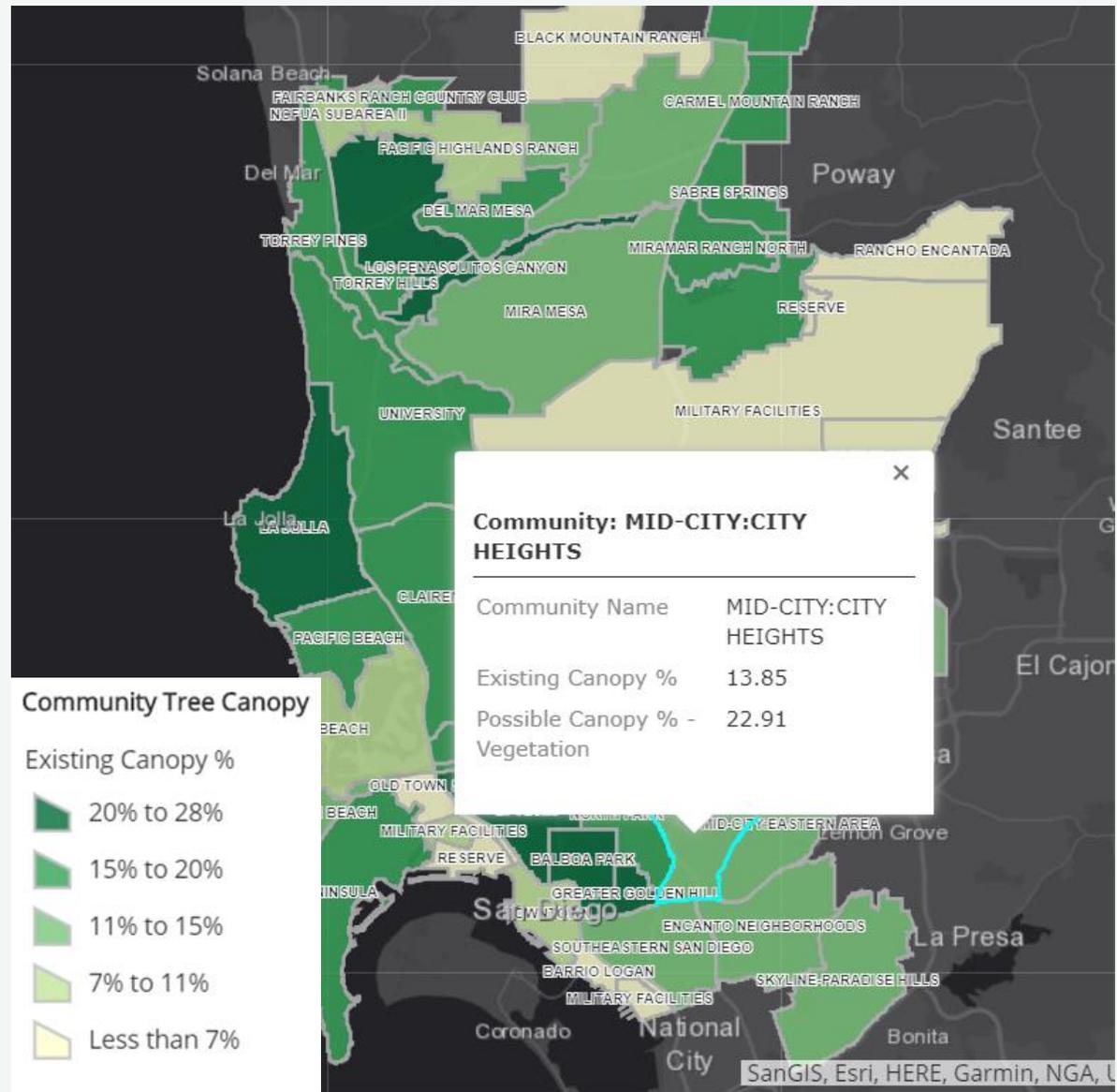
Source: El Cajon Boulevard Planning Study, City of San Diego

III. Individual Site Analysis

Tree Coverage

Tree coverage is lacking along El Cajon Boulevard. A basic coverage assessment showed trees covering only 5% of the area along El Cajon. Whereas in City Heights, existing tree canopy covers about 14% of total land area.

According to the City of San Diego's tree canopy data, City Heights has the potential to increase canopy coverage to 23%. Increasing tree coverage where permitted would greatly improve walkability of the Little Saigon corridor. It would also provide additional benefits in terms of improved air and water quality, reduced heat island effect, reduced energy use in buildings, enhanced property values, and other mental and physical health improvements (City of San Diego, 2019).



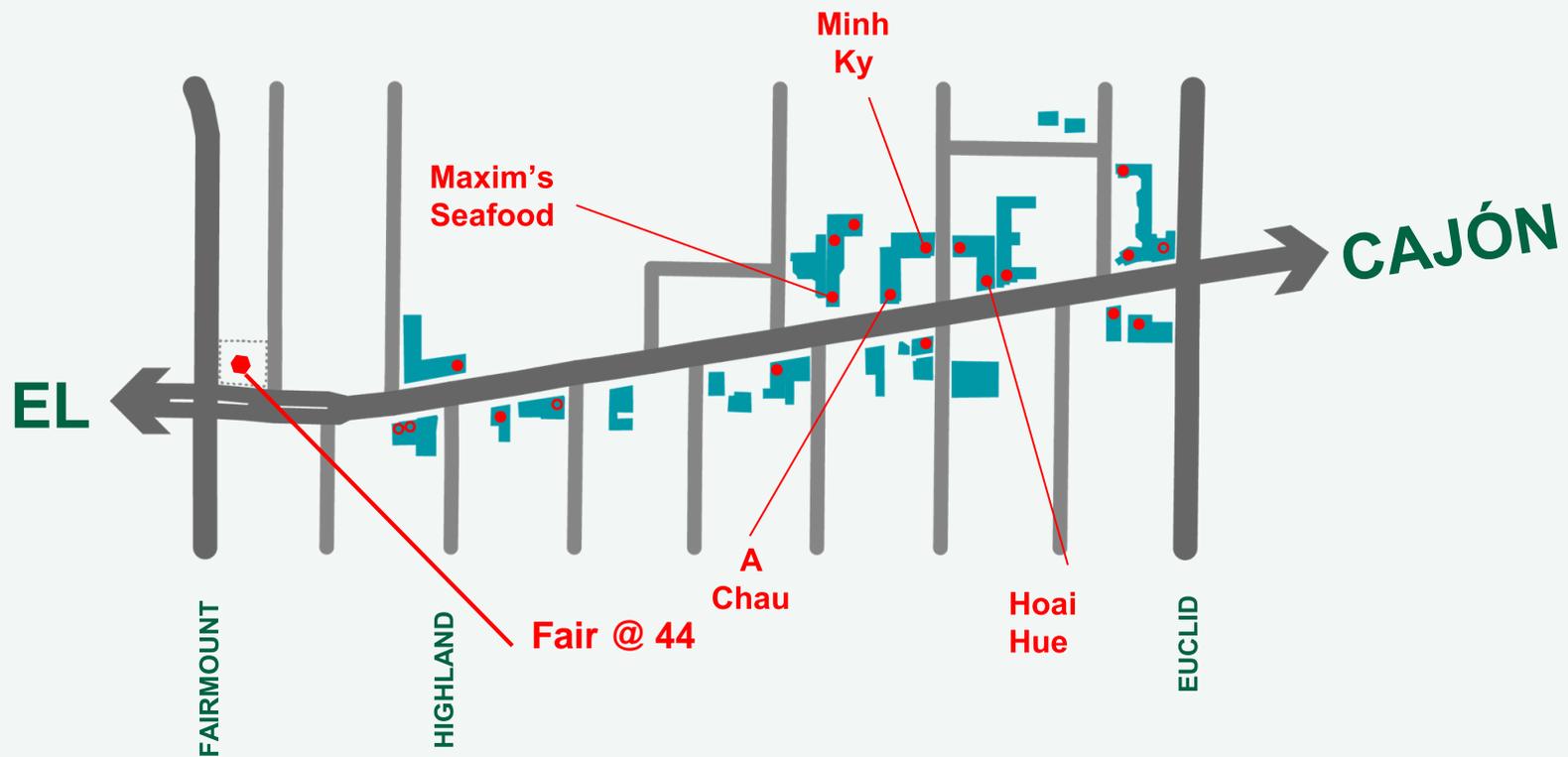
Source: Sandiego.gov

III. Individual Site Analysis

E. Community Assets

The concentration of Vietnamese restaurants is a critical character defining feature. This concentration works because it can meet a full spectrum of the community's needs. Cuisines vary by region and specialty, with some restaurants having more of a sit down model while others are structured more for carry-out and catering.

These businesses maintain a street presence through the predominant use of signage with red lettering. While many employ a latinized alphabet with appropriate accent marks as needed, others use Chinese characters that reflect ethnic distinctions within the San Diego's broader Vietnamese-American community.

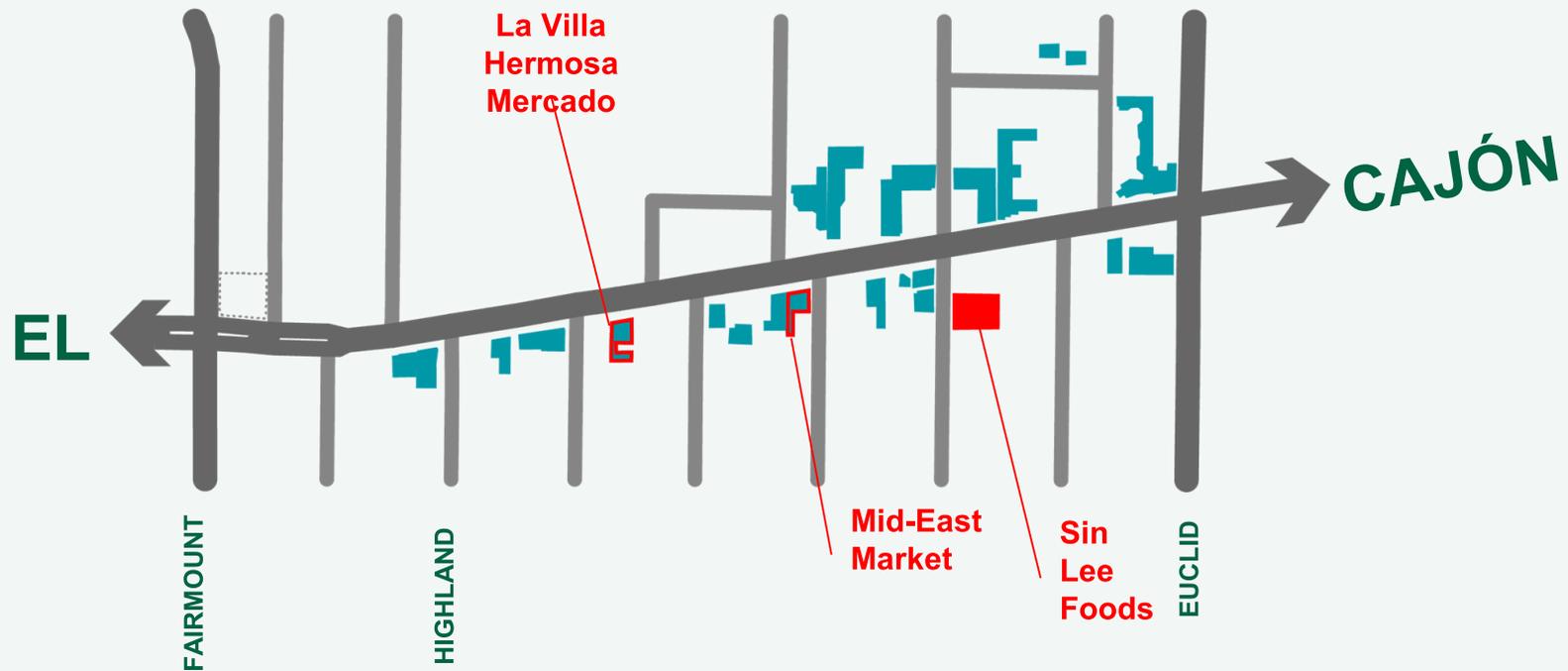


III. Individual Site Analysis

F. Site Connection To Entire Neighborhood

Little Saigon's business-oriented economy is a constant draw, making it an essential regional marketplace. The highlighted markets act as anchors in this respect, ensuring that a variety of refugee families and ethnic communities can find and prepare food that's meaningful and familiar to them.

Moreover, these markets are a critical resource for working families, who generally cannot afford to go out to eat multiple nights a week. City Heights is arguably defined by these families, and having them along one of the principle commercial corridors that service the area (the other is University) is a boon to residents generally.



IV. Individual Site Recommendations

A. Needed Improvements

Build stronger connections:

Link the numerous cultural, religious, and educational institutions in the area



Source: Harris Rosenblum

Honor the story of Vietnamese Refugees and connect to other/newer refugee communities



Source: Roadside America

Attracting Opportunity:

Locate possibilities for future affordable housing - vacant sites, abundance of auto-body shops along corridor.



Source: Harris Rosenblum

Incentivize Tenant friendly rent-to-own programs to build larger home-owner base



Source: Rafael Fontes

IV. Individual Site Recommendations

B. Funding Sources

Our Town grant program



Source: National Endowment for the Arts

Dedicated BID funding



Source: City Heights Business Association

Storefront Improvement Program



Source: City of San Diego

Land Value Tax



Source: City of San Diego

IV. Individual Site Recommendations

C. Cost / Benefit Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Existing City-based cultural designation
- High concentration of family-owned businesses
- Strong sense of cultural identity
- Potential to catalyze linkages between disparate communities within City Heights

WEAKNESSES

- Streetscape infrastructure is ongoing, but there's a need for shade
- Alleys are not as activated as they could be
- Pedestrian crossings need improvement

→ *Proposed Cultural District*

El Cajon blvd between Fairmount and Euclid along
Euclid from El Cajon to University.



Source: Robert Keatinge

V. Conclusion

Should this be a California Cultural District?

By conducting our research per the methodology established in the background (section II), and after comparing our observations with that of our colleagues, it became clear to us that Little Saigon would be the strongest contender for achieving a cultural district designation within the broader City Heights area. The existing local designation, in addition to the vibrancy and general enthusiasm we experienced from interviews, were key factors in this decision when compared to the relatively lackluster responses that other teams encountered in their respective areas.

With that in mind, it's necessary to add that our recommendation comes with additional considerations that must be addressed before any application effort is undertaken. Chief among these are the issues of walkability along El Cajon Boulevard. In our discussions with stakeholders involved with the Barrio Logan application process, the state officials were critically concerned with walkability issues. While work is currently being undertaken along El Cajon to address these issues, there's a need to broaden this scope to adjacent streets and blocks that connect to El Cajon.

Because many of our recommendations will take more than a year to implement, we urge that they be undertaken as swiftly as possible. If an application effort is mounted and not successful, then state feedback can be incorporated and pursued for the following round.



Source: Harris Rosenblum



Source: City of San Diego

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