Student Advocacy Bridges Two Communities

Fifth grade students from Belle Hall Elementary School in Charleston, SC, spent seven years advocating for a pedestrian path on the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge, which ultimately connected two diverse communities.

Students were concerned that the proposed bridge wouldn’t have a bike and pedestrian path, making it difficult for residents on each side to have access to recreation and fresh food. Students formed the “Bike Bunch” to campaign for safe bike and pedestrian lanes on the new bridge. After surveying hundreds of Charleston area residents and researching national trends and bridge designs, they presented the findings to the bridge planning committee. As a result of their efforts, combined with the efforts of other organizations, the plans for the new bridge were altered to include a spacious pedestrian and bike lane.

The impact of their efforts was clear throughout the Charleston community. Dr. Don Sparks, president of the Charleston Bicycle Advocacy Group commended the students saying, "I will never again take on an environmental issue without involving young people."

The students feel that the experience helped them "build confidence in talking with adults, approaching strangers about an issue and to realize that we can have influence on powerful politicians."

When the community celebrated the bridge’s completion seven years later, students came from as far away as New Hampshire to attend the opening ceremony where they collectively walked over the new pedestrian lane.

Over a decade later, the city references their work when advocating to add pedestrian paths to existing bridges. An article recently published in the Charleston Post and Courier said, “Just as the bridge is notable for its stunning design, its impressive engineering and indeed its very existence, it is notable for changing the attitudes and expectations of the local community… When members of Charleston Moves, the Coastal Conservation League, and Earth Force started the conversation, the concept was foreign to most people. State officials said it would be a waste of taxpayer money because no one would use it.”

The students’ success in adding a pedestrian path to the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge has created opportunities for recreation, equal access to community resources, and has even become a tourist attraction.