What do you see when you see fields of excess parking?
Building managers see costly spaces that require annual maintenance, Public Works staff sees impervious surfaces that flush toxics into the bay, create urban heat islands and reduce air quality on hot days.

At TransForm we see the potential for gardens, playgrounds, community gathering spaces, and green bioswales to filter water. We see the potential to save families money and to promote health. And combined with programs that offer families new transportation options to reduce car ownership, we even see the potential to provide enough space for more affordable housing to be built on some sites.

This is no small vision. TransForm estimates there are at least 10,600 acres of excess parking in Silicon Valley. And we’ve identified dozens of acres at affordable housing developments as part of our new GreenTRIP parking database.

That is why, in partnership with First Community Housing and Valley Verde, we are proposing a pilot project called “Unpaving Paradise.” We believe the success of this pilot, combined with participation from City of San Jose, will create tangible results, inspire the community, and enable broad replication.
Why is the opportunity so large? Decades of requirements for excessive parking – even when building near public transit or affordable homes for seniors – has created a massive parking excess. Yet institutional barriers create significant obstacles to reclaiming these lots, especially the need to go through a costly and time-consuming process of re-permitting the property.

Unpaving Paradise will start with a pilot project at First Community Housing’s (FCH) 246-unit Rincon de Los Esteros property. It currently has 78 unused parking spaces. TransForm will first work with FCH to bring innovative new transportation options to residents, including a new form of peer-to-peer carshare: Getaround.com. Through intensive resident outreach in one development our program will help overcome some of the barriers low-income families face in using peer-to-peer carshare (proximity, trust, and limited vehicle availability). Residents who own vehicles can generate new income by sharing their cars when not in use. This will complement effective new carpool matching and public transit information we’ll introduce to residents. Combining these strategies can increase access to opportunities while reducing car ownership and household costs. It can also create greater certainty for the City that the reclaimed spots won’t be needed in the future.

Then, with Valley Verde, a local non-profit that helps residents in Santa Clara County grow their own vegetables, we will add raised beds on the reclaimed parking spaces. Valley Verde will employ former program participants that are currently unemployed to provide residents with the knowledge and tools needed to grow and maintain their own organic vegetable gardens at no cost. This will include a kid’s garden that has already proven successful at another FCH property. Valley Verde will also teach healthy eating habits through yearlong gardening and nutrition classes. The urban farms improve low-income families’ daily access to fruit and vegetables and act as an educational hub and community space.
Finally, FCH will also add bioswales to capture and filter stormwater runoff while providing more space for trees and vegetation.

The goals of our pilot project include:

- Increase transportation choices and reduce transportation costs by introducing innovative transportation options for low-income families.
- Reduce food costs and increase daily access to organic produce, saving families $300-$700 annually.
- Promote physical activity through gardening and increased levels of biking, walking, and transit use.
- Promote community and social cohesion with common spaces, kids’ gardens, and playgrounds.
- Put a value on unused parking, the largest remaining source of developable land in Silicon Valley, to promote health and affordability.
- Create more attractive, walkable environments, especially in San Jose’s Urban Villages.

We will work with City of San Jose departments to evaluate the results and provide a model for systematizing this approach in San Jose, and then beyond. Valley Verde, with a goal of setting up gardens for 5,000 low-income families, is thrilled with the potential to identify so many sites adjacent to low-income housing.

This project seeks to disrupt the planning sector, starting with residential development. It challenges the incredibly expensive, unhealthy model of development that requires massive amounts of free parking while disallowing the use of excess parking. This has kept building owners and managers from placing a value on this land, or having an incentive to promote transportation choices.
With transportation and food as the second and third largest family expenses, respectively, what better way to disrupt development patterns than by introducing innovative new carsharing and ridesharing tools (to guarantee that excess parking isn’t needed in the future) then using the pavement in ways that promote healthy activity and eating, protect our water supply, and increase the beauty of our neighborhoods.

This program can create great new strategies to reach the San Jose’s goals. The City of San Jose is especially interested in seeing how travel demand management strategies like carsharing and free transit passes can be bundled into residential development, and can reduce parking requirements. Additionally, the City is exploring programs to create healthy, resilient communities through food-based and other land use programs.

There are a couple of organizations, Depave in Oregon and Rebar in San Francisco, that have reclaimed parking, but none that weave in transportation strategies to further reduce vehicle ownership. Specific project roles will be filled by our Unpaving Partners: FCH is providing property management and ongoing project coordination and translation services, Valley Verde will provide urban gardens and resident training, and the City of San Jose will provide project promotion, regulatory guidance, and expertise.

We believe this project can address some of the root causes of disparities in health outcomes and families of all incomes to benefit from the innovation that comes out of Silicon Valley. To date, much of the shared mobility options enabled by new technology, like carsharing and ridesharing, have had limited impact in improving the lives of low-income families.

After the pilot, families would have access to Valley Verde’s organic gardening workshops, seeds, and can learn how to germinate their own seedlings. This project would also be incorporated into FCH’s existing community gardening program with regular work sessions, planting and teaching sessions and harvesting events.

Our second phase would be heavily focused on replication. The City of San Jose would help publicize the effort to stakeholders interested in replicating the project on their properties. TransForm would then identify additional sites and work with City staff to address the regulatory barriers that currently inhibit widespread replication (e.g. zoning, permits, and approvals).

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