



City of Palo Alto

Cool Block Program Frequently Asked Questions

Responses to common questions related to the Palo Alto Cool Block program:

Q1. What is the Cool Block Program in Palo Alto?

A. Cool Block Palo Alto engages teams of neighbors living on a block (or in an apartment building) to tackle the most critical issues of our time – climate change, a fraying social fabric and disaster resiliency – by providing a structured approach to making meaningful and lasting changes in our community as well as building our capacity to achieve large goals in a short time period.

Q2. How many blocks are participating in this Beta 2 pilot program?

A. The City is adding 25 new Cool Blocks through this current Beta 2 pilot program. These blocks will be from different parts of the community based on where volunteer block leaders reside.

Q3. Why is the City paying for this program when it is volunteer-based?

A. Similar to other programs in the City, such as the Emergency Services Volunteers program, where the City contributes staff time or financial resources to efforts within the community, the City is contributing some funds and staff time to the Cool Block program. The Council-approved contract and staff report are available online and show the \$25,000 direct funding commitment as well as some associated staff time.

Q4. What happens after this Beta 2 pilot and how much does it cost?

A. As explained in the staff report, Phase 2, which would come after the Beta 2 Pilot program, is at the sole discretion of the City Council in determining next steps. The hope is to further grow the program in the city.

Q5. Why is this a separate program from existing organizations or programs, such as Palo Alto Neighborhoods, Emergency Service Volunteers, or the Sustainability Implementation Plan?

A. The Cool Block program is intended to create a space for neighbors to get together, create social capital, and to learn from one another and guests. It is multi-disciplinary and thus does not fit squarely into any one City department. It also allows the Cool Block groups to be nimble as a smaller group instead of a whole neighborhood convening. The program is complementary of existing City efforts, especially in the energy and waste reduction realms as it expands the City's direct contact reach and provides a space where neighbors can discuss their individual progress and encourage neighbors to consider changes as well.

Q6. My neighbors are already connected, why do we need a program which purports to do the same thing?

A. While some neighbors and blocks are very well connected, the National Citizen Survey, annually conducted by the City of Palo Alto, has shown that the overall

sense of community in Palo Alto has decreased over time. In 2003, the survey results showed that 70 percent of survey respondents found that the sense of community in Palo Alto was good or excellent. In 2017, only 56 percent of respondents found the sense of community to be good or excellent. In the period in between 2003 and 2017, the average satisfaction rate (rating it as good or excellent) was 66 percent. These survey results, as one data source, reflect the growing need of neighbors' desire to feel connected to one another. When asked in the National Citizen Survey what "Sense of Community" means, the most common answer was "[being] Friendly/neighborly, offering helping hands and working together." Forty-two percent (42%) of those respondents offering comments provided this response.

The survey also showed that respondents feel that the "Neighborliness of residents in Palo Alto" has decreased. It was 64% in 2014 and only 60% in 2017.

Q7. Does the City have any matching funds for this program since the City has to put up money?

- A.** The Empowerment Institute (a non-profit organization) is the Cool Block program founding organization. It is contributing the same amount as the City: one staff person and \$25,000 in direct costs for the Beta 2 Pilot program.

Q8. Why don't the Alpha and Beta Pilot results reflect all previous participants? How is the carbon reduction calculated? Why do you allow blocks to pick whatever actions they want?

- A.** As with any program, 100% of participants do not respond to surveys about their experience, nor submit all documentation about their experience. This is why only 97 of 175 households are accounted for in the metrics shown for the Alpha and Beta Pilot programs. However, since the Alpha and Beta Pilot programs, the Empowerment Institute has changed their online interface to make the 'action-tracking' tool into an easy-to-interface online platform. With this upgrade, the program participants will be able to more easily track their actions instead of needing to fill out paper forms and submit them. This should help with increasing the "reporting household" numbers.

Carbon reduction is measured by the carbon calculator in the toolkit on the Cool Block website. It is a modified version of the carbon calculator provided by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). It is used to measure the difference between a household's energy usage at the start of the program versus at the end of the program. The usage is measured on a per household basis and is not compared to any larger data point such as city/county/state, etc. The goal is to help households to be able to have a tangible way to estimate how their behavior changes contribute to changes in their overall carbon footprint which contributes to the City's larger sustainability implementation efforts.

Lastly, the program is designed to let each household and block group determine the actions that are most fitting for their specific household and block instead of mandating that each household and block across the whole city perform the same actions. This leaves the flexibility for each block to meet their own specific needs and determine tangible actions to pursue based on the bandwidth of the individual household participants.