

# How 5 local women stopped Safeway from building a gas station in their neighborhood

These local activists made history with their “No Gas Here” campaign. Now they’re planting trees in celebration.



On a brisk morning last month, about 100 volunteers showed up, shovels ready, at McDowell Park, a small east side park across from Washington Square Shopping Center. The park has a baseball field, a playground for small children, a picnic area with a grill and a grassy field where children’s

soccer teams practice and dog walkers socialize. An elementary school, a preschool, and a childcare center are next to the park, with two large apartment complexes across the street.

The park has few frills but offers a precious outdoor space enjoyed by many people in the neighborhood.

The volunteers were there to plant 80 trees in the park and on the grounds of McDowell Elementary School. The event was organized by ReLeaf Petaluma, a nonprofit organization with a mission to plant 10,000 native trees – such as coast live oak, valley oak and California cottonwood – in neighborhoods throughout the city. The trees will beautify the neighborhoods and, perhaps more crucially, provide cool shade, promote a biodiverse ecosystem and capture CO2 to help counter the effects of climate change.

Wearing sturdy shoes and gardening gloves, Rebecca Carpenter, Eugenia Praetzel, JoAnn McEachin, Kim Pierce and Adriann Saslow were among the volunteers who came ready to dig.

These five women led the “No Gas Here” movement in the east Petaluma neighborhood, which ended successfully in March of 2021 when a city ordinance banning new gas stations was passed.

“It feels like the final chapter of a very long book, and planting trees that produce clean air for the schools and community who need it feels like the right thing to do,” Pierce commented. She lives in the neighborhood and works as a loan signing agent. The “long book” she refers to is the multi-year campaign her group led against plans to build a large Safeway gas station on the corner of McDowell Boulevard and Maria Drive.

“It all started nine years ago,” said Saslow, a mother and a web designer who lives across the street from the once-planned gas station site.

"Our family had just bought a house, and within a month we received a letter from the Planning Commission about the safety of putting a gas station across the street," recalled Saslow, who said she was stunned. "I said expletives that should not be in print!"

Safeway, it turns out, had proposed putting a new eight-pump gas station on the corner of McDowell Boulevard and Maria Drive.

Saslow attended a public meeting, which was almost empty. At the time, the city's Planning Commission was only required to notify people within 500 feet of a proposed development, Saslow said, adding that only two or three homes received the notification. But she offered her feedback.

"I said, 'Could you please not build a gas station there?'" she recalled. After the meeting, she launched a website to garner support.

Saslow heard nothing about it for the next five years. She'd begun to think that the project had been abandoned when she received a second Planning Commission meeting notification about the gas station. It was there that she met JoAnn McEachin.

"JoAnn drafted a petition," Saslow said. "It was right after my son was born. I remember scrolling Pinterest and looking for articles on how to do Facebook and internet better while nursing my son in the middle of the night."

Rebecca Carpenter became involved when she was approached by a neighbor, Chris Marsh, with a petition. Carpenter is a Department of Energy administrative contractor at Berkeley Lab and lives a few hundred feet away from the gas station site. She was on the way out of Safeway when Marsh pointed toward the childcare center across the parking lot.

"She told me, 'That's where they want to build a gas station,'" Carpenter said. "Well, that school is a Four C's, which provides childcare for low-income working families. They do a fabulous job of taking care of children in

our county. This just set my hair on fire."

Another concern for Carpenter was benzene. Gasoline contains the chemical, which is harmful when inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

Eugenia Praetzel, an educator at McDowell Elementary School at the time, recalls learning about the planned construction later than the others.

"There was minimal outreach to the school," she said. "I taught for many years on that campus so I knew many kids spent long hours there, often until 6 at night, because their parents were working."

One concern was that with normal wind patterns, carcinogens from the gas station would blow directly into the preschool and into the classrooms. "The more research I did about those toxins," said Praetzel, "the more frightening it became. That inspired me to dig my heels in."