



SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Monday June 11, 2007 at 7:30 a.m.
City Hall Conference Room A

The Safe Routes to School Committee met on Wednesday, June 11, 2007 at 7:30 a.m. at City Hall Conference Room A.

I. Call to Order: Christina Westfall brought the meeting to order at approximately 7:30 a.m.

II. Roll Call: Present were City Council Representatives Ken Smith, Chairman of the Traffic & Safety Committee, City Councilors Christine Dwyer and Ned Reynolds, Debbie Finnigan, Traffic Engineer, Detective Chris Cummings, Police Commissioner Gerry Howe, Police Department representative, Robert Lister, Superintendent of Schools and Clay Hayward, School Board representative, Christina Westfall and Jonathan Bailey, Traffic & Safety Representatives.

Also present were the following: Jill LeMay, Principal Dondero, Robin Burdick Principal Little Harbor and Ann Ellis Assist Principal Middle School.

III. Acceptance of the Minutes:

It Was Voted on a Motion made by Councilor Reynolds to accept the minutes of the May 14, 2007 meeting by adding "Maine" to Coordinator of the Safe Routes to School Program on Page 4. Seconded by Councilor Dwyer. Motion passed.

IV. NEW BUSINESS:

A. Discussion with Principals - Issues and Concerns

The Chair asked for questions and any ideas for implementation

Bob Lister, Supt. of Schools asked the Chair to give the Principals the purpose of this Committee.

Debbie Finnigan responded that the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program started several years ago and was a way of having funding for all the states that did not require a match, it could be used for educational programs and ways to encourage kids to bike and walk as opposed to get into a car or bus. Such things as a bike rally, putting in a sidewalk stretch where there might not be one where kids walk in a shoulder or grass or through the woods and it should be paved and have lighting to make it safer. A walking school bus where kids have stops and a parent or volunteer pick up groups of kids. We

are trying to alleviate the fear so parents feel comfortable letting their kids walk to school.

Supt Lister stated he was responsible for inviting the Principals today as there was some discussion at the last meeting regarding programs and to have you here to give some idea to the Committee how many walkers. The Principal from New Franklin was unable to attend and relayed that walkers with parents full time is 9 children, walkers with parents part-time is 4 children and walkers without parents is 7, there are approximately 280 students.

Councilor Reynolds stated that SRTS program exists at the National level with funding behind it. Every 5 years there is a Federal Transportation Bill, a Federal Highway Bill including other modes of transportation and this program is included in that. Generations ago, more kids walked to school and it has been recognized that there are benefits and concerted efforts to bring it back. There are all kinds of resources and funding behind it for infrastructure such as sidewalk, bike lanes as well as costs of education, management, encouragement and associated expenses trying to get a concerted effort to have more kids and families more comfortable getting the kids walking back and forth to school. There are many reasons for this, health and a sense of community to relieve traffic congestion. To be successful it will take a big wide effort by Community, PTA, and Citywide Neighborhood Associations. Appreciated the Principals being present this morning.

Setting up a Sub-Committee or Sub-Committees for the Schools - Debbie Finnigan stated there was discussion on whether or not we should have sub-committees, sub committee at each school or school wide sub-committee to help discuss concerns, issues, ideas which you may feel more appropriate. Each individual school may have different issues than another school. It really is what you feel is more appropriate for you, whether it is a good idea to have a school related subcommittee to help us out.

Ann Ellis stated for the Middle School she did not have the numbers with her and when the survey was done it was shockingly low, something to the effect of 26 out of 500 who regularly walked to school, there are occasionally more on nice days. There is the cool factor in the Middle School and feels the need to make it somehow cool to walk and ride a bike.

Jonathan Bailey asked what can we do to reach the parents? Stated she hears more about the buses, it is a nice time to talk with my middle schooler who might not otherwise engage me in conversation, more of this rather than the safety part.

At Little Harbor there are approximately 392 children, 225 are bus students and at the elementary level you need to recognize with parents working there are daycare situations, and feels dropping off is safer and less time consuming. Little Harbor had an active Traffic & Safety Committee working with John

Burke and in some cases, things are partially safe and then not safe, the path through to New Castle Avenue and parents worried about the safety, two accidents on South St. crossing Broad at the double crosswalk. The Police Department has worked with us, but there is the mind of a 5-year old. There are quite a few people that ride in bad weather, not enough bike racks and believe it is people not working that walk. People who work are still dropping kids off. In snowy weather walkers go down to 20 children, even though there are 70-80 that can walk. Also need to recognize social economic factor. The traffic and getting buses in is a nightmare, and not enough parking. Kids walk only in the good weather. Police have been asked to be present at some of the dangerous intersections. One difficult thing is the police shift changes same time as elementary schools get out.

Dondero School has very few walkers, many parents chose to pick up and drop off their children and estimates that to be 50-60 cars in a day. There are 15-20 children who walk or ride their bikes to school. Some walk alone, some with parents or a friend, there are more walkers in the afternoon than the morning. The car traffic is very scary. The traffic flow was changed in front of Dondero for pickup and drop off, and still do not have a crossway in the school parking lot. Children walk from the front entrance of the school across cars parked under the trees with no one there to guide them. Custodians are out there directing traffic and are fearful of children's lives. It was built to be a walking school and that is not happening. Feels we need to work on educating parents and how do you do that?

Councilor Dwyer stated all the principals have raised the reasons why the State suggested that maybe a good way is school related sub committees as it is so much a parent issue. While similar issues, there are characteristics to each school that are different.

Principal Robin Burdick stated that Little Harbor had a goal in March to walk 2007 miles and made a safe walking trail and we have had about 10 miles from home and the rest were from us. All 3 schools are working on childhood obesity as an issue, morning time is crunched.

Councilor Raynolds suggested involving the City-wide Neighborhoods, putting the word out, often times people who are interested will come forward. Parents who don't work or have a flexible work schedule where they can walk in the morning, if we could establish the walking school bus program, where the parent is the walking school bus driver walks a certain route each day picking up 8 who have signed up for that walking bus relieves 7 other parents having to drive to school, giving those parents extra time. It is about figuring out how wide a program can be put together with different elements that can try and meet as many needs to accomplish our goal of raising the percentage of kids that walk or bike to school to a higher level.

Superintendent Lister feels we need to educate parents, parents just do not want to let their kids walk to school, we are pushing wellness, pushing good nutrition in schools, there are crossing guards, and feels the weak link is educating parents.

Councilor Smith stated he drops his kids off in the morning and the reason we do this is that they would be sitting on the bus for over an hour from pick up to drop off at school. Did not want to get the kids up that much earlier to put them on a bus to sit for an hour. Coming home in the afternoon they walk from St. Patrick's to our store on Deer St. We gave them walkie talkies so that we know when they're leaving school, it made us feel safe having communications. When they asked to walk, at first we said "no way" but realized we had to come up with a way for it to work. When setting up subcommittees and start talking with parents, believing it has to be parent driven, hoping we can come up with some solutions. Maybe getting walkie talkies, what kid doesn't like a walkie talkie, it alleviates parents' biggest concern "is something happening on the road".

Councilor Dwyer suggested the litigation question be addressed to the State Coordinator and ask our attorneys to be present at the next meeting. Feels going through the Neighborhood Associations and parents. We also need to make the kids want to do it. Broad St. is potentially very dangerous, kids are in the street all the time.

Supt. Lister stated he goes on Broad St. frequently and there are always kids in the street.

Principal LeMay stated there are no sidewalks in Elwyn Park and is a huge concern, children need to walk on the side of the road. There are some in the Woodlands but when they come into Elwyn Park there are none, if we put a push on walking, would need to look at that. Ms. LeMay felt the survey in the packet was very well done. Asked if there were plans to send out a survey like this or this survey?

The Chair stated this is one of our goals and whether we use this one or prepare another. It would be better to put out in the fall. The Chair asked the Committee would they like to use this one or refine by adding. It was felt there was a lot of good information but was long. This one is geared toward the parent and to consider doing one to the students.

Jonathan Bailey asked if there were other already existing resources that could be used? Suggested not dropping the child at the door but drop off at a corner or two corners away, still would have car time and control of pick up and drop off but extending it to the door.

Clay Hayward felt a survey for the kids is a good idea, they would be straight to the point, tell you both good and bad.

Councilor Raynolds thought the survey was ok but thinks before we do a survey, what information do we now have, what information do we lack and what is our goal, purpose in doing the survey.

Debbie Finnigan asked how computer savvy are the parents? Could this be put on the website?

Ann Ellis responded she has better response with sending e-mails rather than the website.

Jill LeMay questioned sending the survey to all parents, she has children living off Rte.1 who will never bike to school, send them to the ones who really have a good possibility, then do it electronically.

Councilor Raynolds stated there is an internet tool, survey data you can set up.

The Chair referred to the kids that live father away, have a drop off point and then walk with the rest of the kids. Another subject discussed was safety patrols in the school and utilize them as crossing guards in the street, which also may help the gap of Police changing shifts.

Ms. LeMay would hesitate using 5th graders in charge of that responsibility.

Ms. Burdick stated using safety patrols as much as possible, but not off school grounds.

The chair referred to bike racks, Dondero has sufficient bike racks, Little Harbor does not have sufficient bike racks, kids use the kick stands and the Middle School has sufficient bike racks.

The Chair asked if the Principals could think of the greatest need at your school, I hear parent education and asked if there was another piece.

Ms. LeMay asked if you're pushing biking or walking, healthy access. Ms. LeMay read all about the bikes on sidewalks.

Ms. Burdick responded education and safe routes. Does not want kids biking on Clough Dr. not biking on sidewalks, a little of both.

Ms. Ellis stated the parent factor and the cool factor at the Middle School.

Supt. Lister responded New Franklin has same issues as Dondero and Little Harbor. Sufficient bike racks.

The Chair thanked the Principals for coming to the meeting.

Councilor Dwyer felt it might make sense to focus on one school at a time. Supt. Lister is interested in what other communities are doing, their strategy, whether it be litigation or how do they involve the community in walking, like runners alley, get them involved and use that as a strategy to take one school. You would think Dondero would be the easiest, but with no sidewalks is a big item. Suggested Little Harbor.

Detective Chris Cummings agreed to begin with Little Harbor as there are so many kids already walking and biking, scooters, sidewalks are there. Det. Cummings spoke with the PE teacher and Guidance Counselor and will do anything they can do to help, we'll get this out, do it at the beginning of next year to get them going so that at the end of Sept. beginning of Oct. they will have a bike/walk/scooter to school week and come up with some incentives. They are easy to motivate to do this and the foundation is already there.

Commissioner Howe stated there will be generic issues that are common to all schools and there are going to be some unique issues. New Franklin because of traffic patterns there, there will be some real hurdles to clear there. His recommendation is to start at Little Harbor.

Supt. Lister also agrees Little Harbor is the place to start but need to be thinking about poster contests for the kids, parents need to be involved and business community, neighborhoods and don't let things like sidewalks and those kinds of things prevent us from doing work, they need to be addressed but not to say we can't do it because we don't have sidewalks.

Councilor Smith suggested maybe doing 2 schools at a time as the City is about to put a million dollars into Woodbury Ave. and should be part of the plan and get parents involved at his time as they said we need this money to do traffic calming, etc. because our kids can't walk to school. It seems there already is a vocal group that wants the kids to do this and should involve them right from the beginning.

MOTION made by Councilor Smith to begin focusing on both Little Harbor and New Franklin Schools and invite the parents. Seconded by Clay Hayward. Motion passed.

Jonathan Bailey felt it was a little early, still have not decided exactly how we are going about this, don't have all resources available to us that we are trying to gather and don't have a plan, we are picking 2 schools to apply a plan that we don't have.

Councilor Smith responded not a plan but this is where our focus will begin, everybody else is invited but we'll begin the focus on two, we don't know what is going to happen with the Middle School.

Councilor Dwyer referred to the grant which we need to focus on and needs to happen before beginning of school and wants to make sure we have infrastructure for Little Harbor. Would a bike lane along Clough Dr. be feasible?

Commissioner Howe stated the Middle School "you are changing," the elementary schools "you are creating."

Councilor Reynolds also agrees that it is too early.

Councilor Dwyer agrees but we need to seize on some of the opportunities to be able to do some quick hit infrastructure which Woodbury potentially is. Another quick hit is a survey for both parents and students.

The Chair stated the surveys can't get out till the fall and we have proposals that are due now and will be working throughout the summer, so we can't utilize that piece of getting the survey out and parent input. We have a proposal in front of us and need to focus on where we're going with that now.

Debbie Finnigan report she looked on the website and it was in draft form and didn't feel comfortable in bringing it as there may be some changes. She will e-mail everyone when it is out.

Councilor Smith asked if there was anything in the CIP that we could possibly pull out and use towards the RFP as the work is already done. If the RFP comes out and we have 30 days to submit, at least half the work is done.

Debbie Finnigan agrees with Councilor Smith, we need to start somewhere whether it's figuring out what the plan should but we can't figure out the plan for all schools, so it makes sense to take 2 schools since people are already excited at Little Harbor to do things. We should pick up on that energy and keep going and people in the Woodbury Ave. section that are excited about getting things done to make it safer for their kids and themselves. It is important and we should feed on that energy and the rest of the schools for a long term plan, which we need, we need to have those short term goals done to make things work and would hate to see this die.

Clay Hayward felt both Councilor Smith and Det. Cumming have great ideas even with the short term plan. The area around Stark and Thornton Sts. the residents would be happy for anything that could be done as to a sidewalk, any type of short term planning just starting to implement sidewalks within that area for the walkers going to New Franklin.

Supt. Lister is more interested in looking at the RFP working with somebody to put it together and put everything on the table and what do we want to do and move ahead. All the schools are cooperative.

Councilor Raynolds suggested putting together a grant to New Hampshire Safe Routes Program asking for money, soft cost money, to have one citywide workshop and then a series of school based workshops to present the program, what it's about, where it came from, what's being done in other communities around the country, what has been successful, what does it look like to the whole community and subsequently need to have facilitated workshops at each school and would hire someone experienced in the program to do this, for example a person from the Maine Safe Routes. There are resources next door that we can access for a small amount of money, get a planning grant and use that money to do those workshops and help all of us and the community and to learn from the experience of others. We could ask Debbie Finnigan to contact John Corrigan and work with him to figure out what's a reasonable amount of money for workshops.

MOTION made by Councilor Raynolds to put together a planning grant to apply towards citywide and school based workshops. Seconded by Commissioner Howe.

Councilor Dwyer is not in favor of this given what was heard from the Principals. We have such a small percentage of kids walking, we need to get something going and what you are talking about is something we ought to do after we have some other stuff going so it will be successful. Need to build up some momentum and then get to strategy.

Councilor Raynolds withdrew his motion and Commissioner Howe withdrew his second.

B. Report Back – grants – Debbie Finnigan reported she went on line to see if any there were any published and could not find any published. Tried to contact people and nobody got back to her.

At the Chair's request, Debbie Finnigan will contact John Corrigan before the next meeting.

Councilor Raynolds asked Debbie if the City does this on a computer based GIS and would be fine at the next meeting to bring in a laptop for a printed map and if the City has this in a way that a laptop can project it and just pick different parts of the City. There is an on-going sidewalk improvement program.

Clay Hayward feels it is important that if Debbie needs any help with that one of us should come forth and offer out assistance. If you need any help with picture taking or anything, please let me know.

Debbie Finnigan stated that at some point she will go on line to see if the draft has become permanent and will probably need help with writing the grant prior to the next meeting.

C. Report back - Rollerblading Ordinance – Detective Chris Cummings reported that skateboarding is prohibited other than in the skateboard parks. Roller skates, coasters, skateboards and similar devices are prohibited in the Central Business District of Portsmouth which is the downtown area. Skateboards are prohibited on all sidewalks and streets in the City other than in designated areas. In line skates, it hasn't touched scooters or anything other than in the downtown area, so rollerblades and scooters the kids all ride to school are okay as long as they are off sidewalks. This causes a problem on South St. which is narrow, there is enough room for sidewalks and all the kids ride their scooters on the sidewalks and some rollerblade. I do not feel police cars will pull up and ask them to get off the sidewalk. The kids are being safe, they are with their parents, their friends, on their scooters, rollerblades as long as they are doing it safely, no one will make an issue of it. If they are jumping on and off the sidewalk, weaving in and out of people, we see that, it will obviously be a safety issue and an issue that we will take up with their parents and the kids and saying "sorry, now you have to walk, you have to take off your rollerblades and walk your scooter. Kids also ride their bikes on the sidewalks on South St., again most are younger kids so it is not an issue of riding at high speed, they're usually just poking along, mom and dad are pushing the stroller next to them. Are we going to say anything, probably not, but is it against City Ordinance, yes, it is. You weigh circumstances. Do I want to take a second grader and stick them in the roadway because that's what the Ordinance says? No, I don't and I'm not going to put that on my shoulders or the City's to say put them in a narrow roadway to get clipped by a car.

The Chair asked if out of this Committee we have a designated bike routes/path that is going to be instituted, can they utilize that with scooters and bikes.

Detective Cummings responded, they would be able to by City Ordinance but we keep getting into the parents, the parents don't want them walking to school, don't want them riding to school, and now parents pushing a stroller with their young sibling, mom's going to say you have to get into the bike lane on the side of the road versus standing next to me on the sidewalk. You'll still see kids on the sidewalks. Because of the history and age of Portsmouth there are many narrow streets and even with a sidewalk, there is not a lot of room for a bike. It is scary riding a bike in this town even for an adult to ride.

Councilor Raynolds stated that riding on sidewalks is prohibited, seems it feasible for someone to propose that we modify riding on sidewalks to apply

to people 12 or under or that bicycles are allowed on sidewalks and shall yield to pedestrians.

Det. Cummings felt it would be appropriate.

Jonathan Bailey brought in an article stating that a majority of bicycle/pedestrian collisions and most bicycle accidents happen on sidewalks.

Debbie Finnigan has been updating the schedule on the website and the October and November meetings fall on the Holiday and asked the Committee their thoughts. The Chair stated that there is a National Safe Routes to School kick off day and asked if the Committee wants a meeting before that. It was decided that the October meeting be held on October 1. The November meeting will be revisited.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

Respectfully submitted

Elaine Boucas
Recording Secretary