



**SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL
PUBLIC INFORMATIONAL MEETING
Monday October 29, 2007 at 7:00 p.m.
City Hall Conference Room A**

DRAFT

The Safe Routes to School Public Informational Meeting met on Wednesday, October 29, 2007 at 7:00 p.m. at the Public Library, Levenson Room.

- I. Call to Order:** Christina Westfall Chair brought the meeting to order at approximately 7:00 p.m. and introduced Committee members, Officer Chris Cummings, Superintendent Dr Lister, Clay Hayward, Councilor Ken Smith, Councilor Ned Reynolds, Councilor Chris Dwyer, Debbie Finnigan, Traffic Engineer. Also present was City Manager John Bohenko. The Chair thanked everyone for being present and turned the meeting over to John Corrigan, NH Department of Transportation, State Coordinator for Safe Routes To School.

- II. Project Explanation – John Corrigan, State Coordinator:** Mr. Corrigan explained the objective of Safe Routes To School (SRTS) is to encourage children who live approximately two miles from elementary schools to either walk or ride bikes. The advantages are physical fitness, reduce traffic congestion, clean air and to become a fun way to get to school. Over the past four years there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of kids walking or riding bicycles to school and a dramatic increase of kids being dropped off from private vehicles and is causing significant environmental problems and air pollution. As a background of the program Mr. Corrigan stated it is a federal program administered by the NHDOT is authorized under a SAFETEA Bill Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act. The program is 100% federally funded, it is a reimbursement program. Communities raise their own money, spend it and with our authority, and then will be reimbursed for eligible projects. New Hampshire has One Million Dollars a year for this program for each of the next five (5) years. There is \$3.9 Million available since the program started late.

An important part of the program is the SRTS Task Force which is a group of people from the community including school leaders, municipal leaders, educators, school teachers, school nurses, school transportation, PTA organizations, parents, anyone who is interested in working together to get more kids to walk/bike to school. The duty of the Task Force is to identify the reasons at the community level for not walking/biking and to find solutions. The planning concept known as the five E's begins with Evaluation, Education, Encouragements, law Enforcement and Engineering also known as Infrastructure.

The Non-Infrastructure's essential part of the program is to make sure the kids are able to walk/bike safely and this requires education of the kids as well as motorists. There is some fear of them being subjected to traffic hazards and crimes. Walking school buses or bike trains. Education and enforcement is needed. The first step is an in-class survey and a survey to parents to get parental concerns. Another thing they suggest is walk ability and bike ability observations, having people go out into the community walk the school routes and try to identify what some of the physical barriers are. Mr. Corrigan presented power point slides of sidewalks that need repair in various communities. Education is an important part of the project to help children develop skills they need to safely navigate in their own neighborhoods, pedestrian and bicycle safety. Bicycles are vehicles and bicycle riders are required to follow the rules of the road. Most learn the rules when getting ready for their drivers license at age 16, which is too late. Hopefully, by teaching kids to ride their bikes according to rules of the road, the lessons will stay with them and when older will be better drivers.

Encouragement Programs are activities that make it fun to walk or ride bikes and are looking for school and community sponsored programs to support that.

School assemblies and pep rallies, walk to school day when students arrive and receive orange juice, oranges and a rally with songs.

The escort programs are very important in encouragement effort. The walking school bus is the kids meet at a certain point and walk with an adult and pick up more kids on their walk to school. The rolling bike train is the same concept, kids from the same neighborhood ride bikes together with adult supervision.

Law enforcement is also an important aspect and recommends someone from your Police Department on your task force.

Infrastructure is also very important and is referred to engineering which are physical changes that encourage walking and biking. Signs, signals and strips are some of the least expensive ways to stretch your infrastructure.

Funding of the program is competitive, Portsmouth submitted an application. All of the requested projects equals to less money than is available and Portsmouth will have a good chance of funding in this first round. Things we will be looking for as the program moves on is clear indication of community support for the program, task force with wide representation, an area where Portsmouth has done a very good job. Looking for creative solutions that are cost effective. This program is all about having kids walking or riding bikes and arriving at school safely.

The Chair thanked Mr. Corrigan. The Chair stated we have the School Board, City Councilors, Police Commissioner, Police Department, but what we need is you, this program doesn't work without you, the community.

III. Survey Results:

The Chair explained the survey stating that 44% of the kids live a mile or less. 36% go in family cars, 33% bus, 18% walk, 10% bike, 3% carpool and 2% other. The cars dropping off the kids and waiting for them to get out of school sit there idling causing a lot of congesting and poses a safety hazard of the air quality. Leaving school there is 36% go

on bus, and the numbers are higher with kids walking, biking and other, so kids are walking home and being dropped off in the morning.

The question what factors effect whether you let your child walk to school? 64% said long distances, speed of traffic, amount of traffic; Intersection crossing safety 57%, all of which are important to us, we are trying to change those numbers so our kids can get out there and safely walk to school. .

The Chair reported the breakdown of the individual schools.

1. Dondero School was built for a walking school, yet no safe way for the kids to walk to school. 84% of the people said speed of traffic, 69% said amount if traffic, 67% intersection crossing safety, distance not so much there. These are the things we need to target.

2. Little Harbor School was more consistent across the board. Distance was a factor, intersection and crossing safely, weather came in to play. 54% distance intersection of crossing safety 51%, weather 51%.

3. New Franklin the only one that brought up violence due to the liquor store, highway and not a very safe way for kids to get to school. This is something that is being addressed on several different levels. Traffic concerns, amount of speed, intersection crossing safety, distance, but the violence is unique to New Franklin.

4. Portsmouth Middle School, distance 77%, speed and amount of traffic, intersection safety

5. St. Patrick's School distance (not surprising as kids come from all over the seacoast). Amount of traffic, intersection safety, speed of traffic and sidewalks.

Across the board, all schools had the same concerns.

IV. Safety in School - Det. Chris Cummings, Police Department:

The Chair introduced Detective Cummings, the elementary school SRO who works with the kids on a daily basis instructing them on bike safety as well as personal safety and gave a brief overview. The Committee asked Det. Cummings to do a bicycle safety program for the elementary kids, starting with Little Harbor and Dondero Schools, as these schools had a lot of the infrastructure already and worked with them to see how this program works. Det. Cummings referred to a young boy that was hit on a scooter who was not wearing his helmet. He was the nephew of a police officer in Newington.

Det. Cummings suggested that Officer LaLime come and speak to the kids at these two schools to give them a personal account of what happened and how it affects the family. During Officer LaLime presentation the kids from kindergarten to 5th grade were totally focused on everything he was saying. They were so impacted by Officer LaLime's story, and Henry's brother sat on stage as we spoke to the kids. Bike helmets were donated by area bike shops for kids that don't have a helmet to make sure they are safe in the route to school. 90% of the kids wear their helmets. A lot of times they take their queues from their parents, older siblings and this is where we need your help to show that you are setting an example. Some of the issues stated in the surveys were personal safety and there are three main rules which he always tell them, the buddy system, no go and tell, when a stranger comes up to you, you tell the stranger "no" you run away and go tell an adult. They all know the three safety rules, they hear it from kindergarten up.

We need your help, we need the community's help to make sure the kids are safe. It's not just putting in sidewalks and lines on the road, we want to make sure our kids are safe.

V. Grant Application and Capital Improvement Plan Projects

The Chair introduced Debbie Finnigan, the City's Traffic Engineer. Ms. Finnigan stated it is really important that the kids start walking to school, we have a beautiful City and they should be out there enjoying it. Ms. Finnigan explained that we applied for our Grant due in September, applying for seven projects, four infrastructure projects and three educational projects. The requested amount was \$93,000. Ms. Finnigan showed a power point presentation explaining the following:

Project 1 - Proposed bike lanes at Dondero School, the main streets coming into the school.

Project 2 – There is a non-paved path from Garfield into the field at Dondero School and the goal is to put a 10' wide paved path and lighting and 10' on either side of the path the undergrowth is cleared so that no one can hide out and the kids can see what is going on.

Project 3 – Place bike racks at St. Patrick's School, Little Harbor and Middle School.

Project 4 – Crosswalks safety improvements, including weebles which are signs placed in the middle of the road and are removable for snowplowing, etc. Signs for marking school routes and crossings to make it more visible, LED lights that come on during drop off and pick up time, 1.5 hours in the morning and 1.5 hours in the afternoon, so they are not on all the time.

Project 5 - A one day City wide workshop with all the schools and perhaps have somebody from the National Organization come in and get us started and get us going and keep the program going.

Project 7 - The last project is to help Det. Cummings as a student incentive program, giving the students a bracelet with a charm because they walked to school every day for a month for example.

Debbie Finnigan referred to the Portsmouth Capital Improvement Projects that are currently in our CIP.

One goal is to widen the sidewalk and narrow the road at Market St. between Market Sq. and Bow St. for more pedestrian room.

North Mill Pond will have a pathway similar to some of the ones Mr. Corrigan has showed us to help kids get from one end to the other.

Peeverly Hill Road, goal is to finish the sidewalks by getting a sidewalk on one side, there is a section that has sidewalks then stops and start up again.

Spinney Road – add a sidewalk on one side and improve the safety of this intersection with a "T".

Woodbury Ave. – a traffic calming project started by the Frank Jones Neighborhood Group, there is not a sidewalk on both sides and the road is wide and cars speed and the goal is to address these concerns. There will be a meeting at City Hall on November 14th at 6:30 p.m. to discuss this project.

There are City-wide reconstruction projects on going every year and one is Court St. from Marcy St. to South St.

A project will be advertised in a few weeks to finish the sidewalk from the Port Authority to Michael Succi Drive and put a sidewalk to the Albacore.

VI. Questions and Comments:

Joe Duffy, Middle School completed his son's survey and stated that there was no mention of environment, 35% of the kids leave school by themselves, his son lives close enough to be able to ride his bike. Mr. Duffy is pleased with this program. Referred to Middle St. between Miller and South Sts. where there is a half mile with no crossings as an example where infrastructure changes would improve safety. 1. Do you think it possible to see this program as a beginning phase of an overall City plan that would tie in with the Master Plan and a plan for all residents as a 1st step in a number of phases of infrastructure in the City. Is it possible to commit resources to improve infrastructure with annual funding?

Councilor Dwyer responded that all CIP projects are the City's investment in infrastructure, a portion of those are part of SRTS, most of the dollars and really City investment in infrastructure. The best developed part of the Master Plan really was about the bike and safety pedestrian, the most detailed specific aspect of the Master Plan. Pleased that within the four months we have been doing this, already the attitude shift has been tremendous with a little education.

The City Manager responded agreed that education needs to be done and that the City has a very proactive Engineering Dept. more so than many other communities, in trying new traffic calming techniques.

Councilor Ken Smith stated that we are here tonight is SRTS program designed specifically to get kids safely to and from the schools. Issues being brought up are issues for CIP as well as Traffic & Safety Committee. These types of issues are ones we are always looking at does it fall under SRTS or Traffic & Safety and is very important those issues come to Traffic & Safety or to City Council to make sure it gets into the CIP, Planning and tonight we are trying to stay with items falling under the criteria of SRTS. Because it is a federal program we cannot use these monies to filter into anything outside of the Middle School and four elementary schools. We work with the City Manager and this group to make sure that we have the right people who have the knowledge of pulling it all together.

John Corrigan stated that if the SRTS program gets the entire community thinking in terms of being walk able, livable and bike able, the SRTS concept in a broader context he has done his job. Infrastructure is very important, education and encouragement is important, they all work together.

Lisa Sweet, 259 Miller Ave. is very happy about this program and the collective effort in the City. There are intersections that need work, the sidewalks are horrible there, no curbs and speeding traffic. Her children walk to school except during snow, the sidewalks are so bad, even when plowed, and snow banks are high.

Mary Lou McElwain, 259 South St. asked what percentage of return on the surveys and the number of kids in the schools.

Debbie Finnigan responded about 20%, there are about 1550 kids, 370-375 surveys received, which is a good return for a first try and people not knowing who we were, perhaps next time we will get more.

Ms. McElwain stated an interesting question to break down is why school buses aren't used in this town, the number of cars at each school is astounding. There are lines of school buses with 6, 12, 16 kids on the bus. As school buses are an important part of transportation to find out why kids aren't using school buses.

The Chair stated that an interesting factor from the Survey was that some of the kids were on the bus for a long long time. The Middle School goes to the High school first and are on the bus for a long time.

Dr. Lister, Superintendent responded when you see the buses leaving the Middle School with 9, 10, 12 students you are going to the high school for high school kids. There are 13 buses under contract and use all the buses as efficiently as we can. To educate parents that it is okay for the kids to walk, bike to school and we need to work together with this.

Ted Gilchrist, Lincoln Ave. stated that a lot of kids walk to school in his neighborhood (Miller and Lincoln) both Middle and Elementary school kids, it's not a case of them needing to be educated on walking, more a case of making it safe, except for one intersection the route would be great. There is just a blinking light there.

Councilor Smith stated that was looked at at the last Traffic & Safety meeting and that intersection will be restriped and repainted and the trees will be trimmed back to make that light more visible, the Police Dept. will put a stealth stat there for speed issue there which is the beginning of a process to try to make that entire intersection safe. The sidewalks are in the CIP program. Councilor Smith stated that every other year money is put aside for the bonding of creating and rehabilitation of sidewalks in the City. With this funding we will be able to use more of that, so it's not just the City, it is a reimbursement program coming back.

Christine McKittrick, 116 Dennett St. – The sidewalks are very treacherous and asked that the hill be looked at, suggested traffic lights, anything that would help.

The Chair responded we would like to see the kids walk/bike to school, it benefits everyone. We have a Senior Citizen community that would love a job watching kids walk to school everyday, helping crossing, it is going to take a community effort, but we can do it.

Tom Martin, 1248 South St. referred to other communities that have unique ways for solutions. We need to be educated as well as the kids.

John Corrigan stated he can give Portsmouth ideas and stated there is very good local leadership and people who care about the issue. The solution has to come from local level but does have some ideas. There is a State Wide Advisory Committee that reviews all applications.

Detective Cummings stated he spends five days a week with the kids at schools and the kids tell their parents what they're learning in school and are quick to correct their parents. The parents need to be educated and to know what to do.

Kirsten Barton, 300 Court St. asked if there was a way for parents to get involved? Little Harbor has a number of parents that want to get involved and want to start a walking school bus and have a number of parents that want to get involved and would be great to work with this Committee and to coordinate.

Councilor Ned Reynolds stated that in order for this program to be successful it has to be community wide effort, an effort that we have this task force community wide made up of City Councilors, Police, School Board, Superintendent to be implemented and one thing talked about is committee's from Schools, PTA, and sees a link between this and the Neighborhood Associations, neighborhood watches.

Councilor Smith stated the first phase was a base line, the first set of surveys, the second was to get the actual survey which we just completed in order to get the funding. We now have submitted the grant for funding, then we have the SRO program and how can we help them, now the next phase is to set up the spin off sub-committees at each of the five schools. The SRO's only have so much time they can commit to just bicycle safety, as there are other portions of their program, we would like to have spin off committees, sub-committees and then have a bicycle rodeo or competition for bicycle safety. The next step will be to do the survey again and again find out what the feel of everybody is. Is violence still an issue, where are we going to go from here? This will finish the school year and next year start again. Again, this summer start the grant funding and a survey next September and will continue the cycle. Seeing how many more ride bikes/walk and less cars coming into the schools. Traffic & Safety will look at where the cars are dropping off the kids, not in the comfort zone of the school with the buses?

Clay Hayward stated since we started this four months ago we listened carefully from Mr. Corrigan's suggestions and recommendations and read pamphlets with the program and as we brainstormed, we realized this is going to be big in Portsmouth. The culture is changing, we are changing. We want people to be using sidewalks. Welcomed those who would like to attend the Committee's meetings which are held the second Monday of each month at 7:30 a.m. at City Hall, Conference Room A.

The Chair stated we will work with you on your walking school bus we want to make this happen and thanked Kirsten Barton for helping with that.

Pete Bresciano, O'Leary Place spoke with parents in his neighborhood who said unless they get sidewalks they aren't going to let their kids walk to school. There are only two ways to get to New Franklin from his neighborhood. The bridge is not a good place to be especially walking. Violence was an issue at the New Franklin and is a big issue now a days. Likes the idea of walking school buses and rolling bike trains.

The Chair stated we need to insure the safety of the children.

John Corrigan stated the idea of the walking school bus and rolling bike trains is for us to take back the streets. There is a huge increase in child obesity and type 2 diabetes. Getting exercise in the morning the kids are more energetic.

Mary Lou McElwain stated the Neighborhood Association is a wonderful way of getting out generation connected.

The Chair thanked everyone for being here tonight, we can not do this without you.

Respectfully submitted

Elaine Boucas
Recording Secretary