

Safe Routes to School Travel Plan Task Force – Meeting Minutes: 24 September 2013 (Page 1)

In attendance: Tracy Bull (Chair), Principal Emilie Carter (MES) (4:00pm), Asst. Principal Jay Gratton (MES), Principal Marsha McGill (JMUES), Leslie Rothman, Sarah Ruffell, Matt Waitkins (NRPC)

Excused members: Bill Cummings, Peter Flood, Rick Greenier, Chris Ortega (School Board)

Mrs. Bull welcomed committee members, calling the meeting to order at 3:35pm.

Mrs. Bull requested a motion to accept the meeting minutes from July 30th, 2013, which was made by Mr. Gratton and seconded by Mrs. Rothman. She made a request for any corrections or clarifications to the minutes. Seeing none, approval of the minutes was put to a vote. The motion carried 6-0-0.

Mrs. Bull invited Mr. Waitkins to discuss the status of the travel plan draft to date. He explained that the draft has thus far been composed based upon data gathered along with his observations and accrued knowledge, noting that he welcomes any and all types of input, from corrections and clarifications to input on key issues, such as barriers preventing more students in the Masticola Complex from walking and biking to school, to recommendations on how to overcome such barriers. He stated this is where feedback from task force members based upon their observations and knowledge becomes key. It was noted that Mr. Greenier provided written feedback to be integrated into the travel plan. Mrs. Bull stated that committee members should not be deterred by potential duplication of ideas. Multiple members observing the same barriers and needs will be indicative of the most key problems and solutions.

Mr. Waitkins stated that extensive sidewalks exist along at least one side of Baboosic Lake Road from the schools complex west down towards a network of neighborhoods within a two-mile distance. These sidewalks vary in condition, some narrow and with portions not necessarily ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant, but generally passable in their present state. Not all neighborhoods leading towards Baboosic Lake Road have sidewalks. He pointed out the crosswalk along Baboosic Lake Road at the intersection of Currier and Indian Rock will likely require assisted crossing for students and periodic enforcement checks from the Merrimack Police Department. It was further noted that the bridge over the FE Everitt Turnpike involves a narrow sidewalk and limited safe passage for bicycle traffic, particularly during the heaviest times of motor vehicle traffic, which is commonly concurrent with school arrival and departure times. The bridge is owned and maintained by the NH DOT. Mrs. Bull noted the importance of reflecting this in the travel plan since the bridge is a major connection piece for students coming to and from school regardless of mode of travel, and is heavily travelled by both busses and private vehicles during school drop-off and pick-up times.

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Mr. Waitkins stated that the unimproved portion on the west side of O’Gara Drive behind the Masticola Complex is a prime location which would benefit from formalized pedestrian access. Such an improvement would not need to be raised sidewalk with curbs, rather, if it were set back from the road a ways, marked with painted lines and appropriate signage, coupled with a marked crosswalk leading to the existing MES drop-off/pick-up area, it would yield appropriate improvement for walkers and bicyclers while leaving the area suitable for future, more organized parking improvements. The need for minimized or otherwise more formally organized parking in that area should also be noted for safety reasons. He shared that he is working with Officer Kelleher in order to obtain accurate data pertaining to accident history along that roadway.

Mrs. Bull invited input and comments on the travel plan draft from committee members present.

Mrs. Rothman stated she feels the draft is easy to follow, which is desirable since the document contains a great deal of data. She believes continuing with the Safe Routes to School initiative is entirely viable and is primarily about education and communication between the two schools and student families. Concepts like walking school busses should be encouraged. She noted that a safe pedestrian connection along DW Highway from Wire Road to Church Street appears critical. Mrs. Bull noted that particular interest is documented in the Merrimack Town Center Pedestrian & Trails Master Plan (iTrac Project, 2009), which is the purview of the Town Center Committee, which is also the parent committee to this SRTS Task Force. She further noted that traffic studies have recently been undertaken to gather data in that area. Mr. Waitkins indicated he has been engaged in a major traffic count project for the Town Department of Public Works, and that outcomes from that study are expected to influence various signal upgrades and a possible reworking of the DW Highway/Wire Road juncture.

As a long time resident of Bishop Street immediately adjacent to the shared parking lot between MES and JMUES, Mrs. Ruffell commented that she never allowed her son to walk to school unaccompanied while he was an elementary student due to safety concerns. While patterns have changed over the years, there is still considerable traffic along that narrow road, particularly during school pick-up and drop-off times, including bus traffic for JMUES, as well as traffic associated with Our Lady of Mercy parish. Not only does a safe walking/biking area need to be developed, she noted there is not presently a stop sign or other traffic control sign on the west end of Bishop Street leading into that parking area. Mrs. Bull noted that bicycle parking for both MES and JMUES exists in that joint parking area.

Mrs. Bull stated that the section of sidewalk along Baboosic Lake Road leading onto School Street would need to be connected to the marked pedestrian area between where parking exists and traffic flows, as there is an area of grass where presently separating the two. This area would benefit from clearer markings and signage as well.

Mrs. McGill was excused at 3:50pm.

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Committee members noted that adult supervision would be desirable for student pedestrian and bicycle traffic during peak arrival and departure times along Bishop Street, School Street, and the O’Gara/McElwain loop, accompanied by periodic traffic enforcement from the Merrimack Police Department. It was further noted that snow and its removal adds to parking issues in the unimproved areas along O’Gara Drive. Mrs. Ruffell shared that a parking attendant is tasked with responsibilities pertaining to the Merrimack High School lots approximately 20 hours per week.

Mrs. Carter and Mr. Gratton recognize existing traffic issues on O’Gara Drive as they pertain to the MES pick-up/drop-off area at the back of the school, but believe that, properly marked and managed, welcoming students wishing to walk or bike to school would be both viable and beneficial. Mr. Waitkins stated it was clear from his observations that school staff from both MES and JMUES who help manage drop-off and pick-up traffic (both busses and private vehicles) do an excellent job. Mrs. Carter shared that a new walking initiative is underway at MES on Wednesday mornings before school, allowing students to accrue distance by walking along the school field area, which is then translated into how far that accumulates into walking across America. Students electing to walk or bike to school could accrue additional distance credit for doing so, and perhaps a day such as Wednesday could become more broadly incorporated as a designated walking or bicycling day. Similar initiatives such as “Fresh Air Fridays” could be developed. She further noted that some communities still train and use older students as safety crossing guards. Mrs. Bull suggested that, particularly for afternoon departures, there may be MHS students engaged in community service groups willing to assist with such an effort.

Mrs. Bull noted that Mr. Greenier (JMUES PE Instructor) has similar interests in encouraging students to engage in walking and biking activities and has been instrumental in leading JMUES students in observing the annual October “Walk to School Day” since 2004. The first JMUES observance of “Bike to School Day” took place in May 2013. Both events occur on the O’Gara/McElwain loop around the schools complex.

Mrs. Bull distributed copies of her observations and recommendations to committee members present, noting that many of her comments pertain to topic areas addressed during the meeting. She stated she has asked Mr. Waitkins to integrate data into the draft detailing areas perceived as unsafe along student travel routes to school as demonstrated during the mapping exercise conducted in June 2013. She reiterated issues and needs for improvements along School Street, Bishop Street, the bridge over the FE Everitt Turnpike, the crosswalk at the juncture of Baboosic Lake Road/Currier/Indian Rock, and O’Gara Drive.

She described that changes are eventually expected as they relate to Church Street both at its juncture with DW Highway, as Town Center Committee efforts are currently underway to have that intersection decommissioned, as well as at its offset intersection with Baboosic Lake Road and McElwain Street. The Town Department of Public Works is currently considering how to

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ensure proper traffic flow in and out of Church Street should that become the sole point of entry and exit to that road.

Mrs. Bull stated she would like to see specific data numbers regarding students who live more than two miles from the Mastricola Complex, separated by those attending JMUES and MES. Students living that far are effectively “distance prohibited” from walking or bicycling all the way to and from school and could easily benefit from extra-curricular walking or biking initiatives. This information could also help with developing more collective bus stops where appropriate, rather than the considerable number of individual bus stops which presently exist.

She reiterated that she would like to see the various existing walking and biking initiatives reflected in the travel plan. This will help encourage the continuance of these activities, plus help increase participation through partnerships with both the JMUES and MES parent/teacher organizations (JMUES-PFA, MES-PATT).

Mrs. Bull explained that she would like to see reference made within the travel plan to similar recommendations that exist in the Merrimack Town Center Pedestrian & Trails Master Plan (iTrac Project, 2009), which include the west side of DW Highway between Church Street and Wire Road (sidewalks action item #2), and O’Gara Drive (sidewalks action item #4). She stated it would also be valuable to mention the sidewalks action item (#6) from that document as it pertains to Woodbury Street. While the surveying conducted by this project did not yield current indication of use by students from the Mastricola Complex travelling to and from school, there are residential properties at the bottom of Woodbury Street near DW Highway, so that could change over time. The street is heavily trafficked during arrival and departure times relevant to Merrimack High School and is travelled on foot by students wishing to access businesses in Connell’s Plaza, Watson Park, and adjacent destinations along DW Highway. Once a pedestrian area is formally developed there, it needs to be done with the various student traffic patterns in mind.

In addition, Mrs. Bull commented that consideration of possible alternate drop-off/pick-up points for students being privately transported to school still needs to be made. This could help alleviate excess traffic congestion around the Mastricola Complex at drop-off and pick-up times, plus afford students the benefit of walking at least a little distance some days. Once identified, undertaking such designated points would need to be well organized and likely supervised.

Mrs. Bull encouraged any additional comments and suggestions from committee members be submitted to Mr. Waitkins as he continues to integrate them into the travel plan.

Mrs. Bull and Mr. Waitkins described the next steps to committee members. He will continue to integrate feedback and recommendations received into the travel plan document during the next few weeks. Once complete, he will again distribute an online link to the document to committee members via email. He will also provide a print copy to any member wishing to have one. Committee members will have time to review newly integrated information in advance of the

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next meeting, at which time the document is expected to be finalized. Action plan recommendations may be listed in order of priority if that is the preference of the committee. Mrs. Bull stated that during the next meeting, plans would also be made to schedule presentations for the Town Center Committee and the School Board. Committee members should expect presenters to include Mr. Waitkins, Mrs. Bull, and likely two other committee members, one of whom should be a school administrator. All committee members will be notified and invited to attend the presentations, but volunteers for the presentations will be needed. Mr. Waitkins stated that planning for Round 7 SRTS infrastructure grant funding letters of intent will also be discussed at the next meeting.

Mrs. Bull noted that the month of October begins on a Tuesday, making the 3rd Tuesday the 15th, and suggested the 22nd might be more appropriate. Committee members in attendance agreed, and the next meeting was set for Tuesday, October 22nd at 3:30pm at JMUES. Mrs. Bull indicated that she would contact Mrs. McGill about reserving an appropriate meeting space.

Mrs. Rothman was excused at 4:30pm.

Mrs. Bull requested any comments or questions from committee members. She indicated she would arrange to meet with Mr. Waitkins later in the week to review relatively minor typographical and formatting corrections and clarifications within the draft document. Following the meeting, both she and Mr. Waitkins planned to observe the sidewalk and crosswalk area at the juncture of Baboosic Lake Road and School Street, which further connects students living along Hillside Terrace and that surrounding area.

Seeing no additional comments, the meeting was adjourned at 4:45pm.