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Safe Routes to School Travel Plan Task Force – Meeting Minutes: 29 May 2012 (Page 1)

In attendance: Tracy Bull (Chair), Principal John Fabrizio, Peter Flood, Rick Greenier, Jean Mazzarella, Principal Marsha McGill, Leslie Rothman, Matt Waitkins (NRPC), John Corrigan (SRTS - NH DOT – guest speaker)

The meeting was called to order by committee Chair Tracy Bull at 3:35pm. She indicated that committee members Mary Frazzetta and Officer Rob Kelleher were excused due to work conflicts. She welcomed the committee membership as well as guest speaker, Mr. John Corrigan, head of the Safe Routes to School program for the NH Department of Transportation (NH DOT). Committee members introduced themselves and their affiliations to Mr. Corrigan. Mr. Flood provided a brief background as to the Town Center Committee, its foundations in the iTrac project from 2008/09, and how those related to the creation of the Merrimack Safe Routes to School project.

Mrs. Bull made a request for any corrections or clarifications to the draft minutes from the meeting dated March 27th, 2012. Seeing none, she requested a motion to accept the minutes as written, made by Ms. Mazzarella and seconded by Mr. Greenier. The motion carried 7-0-0.

Mrs. Bull explained that Mr. Corrigan would provide the committee with a PowerPoint presentation relating to the State's SRTS program, and that his visit would also relate to a new requirement for a pre-application workshop. Mr. Corrigan distributed copies of the NH DOT SRTS program pamphlet to committee members, explaining that the program is part of a nationwide effort to encourage school children in grades K-8 to safely walk or ride bicycles to school. The program is designed to promote physical fitness, reduce traffic congestion and thereby promote cleaner air and a healthier environment, and encourage walking and biking as a safe, fun means for students to get to school. The NH DOT participates in SRTS with support from the Federal Highway Administration under the Federal Transportation Bill known as SAFETEA-LU. The NH SRTS program offers 100% reimbursement under a tiered program, and has awarded approximately \$1 million per year for the past 6 years.

Mr. Corrigan shared that, in recent decades, the number of private vehicles on roads has increased dramatically, as has the number of school children being privately transported to school. The SRTS program is not specifically designed to reduce the number of school buses. In fact, data shows that reducing school busing budgets actually results in increased private transportation of students. All this creates greater traffic congestion and minimizes safe places for students to walk and bike to school, particularly seasonally. Often times there are spatial conflicts and/or physical obstacles between school traffic and those walking or biking to school. School traffic congestion further creates environmental issues due to increased idling, which, in turn, can lead to serious health issues.

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Mr. Corrigan shared data from 2009 demonstrating that nearly 1/3 of NH school children are considered overweight. Type II Diabetes is showing up at earlier ages than ever before and in epidemic numbers, with 2009 data demonstrating that 10% of all US health care costs are attributable to issues related to obesity. Nationally, this translates to some \$147 billion per year that could be spent elsewhere, for instance on education. Children who gain an early appreciation of walking and bicycling are more likely to remain active and physically fit into adulthood. Mr. Corrigan explained that the primary issue preventing more families from allowing young students to walk and bike to school is fear related to concerns surrounding traffic accidents, bullying, violence and the like. Instead parents seek motorized means of transportation, yet statistically, motor vehicle accidents are presently the leading cause of death in children ages 3-14.

Mr. Corrigan explained that under SRTS, the local task force becomes the heart of the program. Composed of school, municipal and regional leaders, as well as parents, students and community groups, these committees identify barriers within their community preventing more students from walking and biking to school, then craft solutions while developing broad community support and involvement for their projects, which can include infrastructure improvements. This comprehensive approach is undertaken by a planning concept referred to as “The 5 Es”: Evaluation, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement and Engineering.

Evaluation can include surveying such as the recent national SRTS surveys administered by this committee, pedestrian and bicycling education, motorist education and enforcement, etc. Mapping must be developed in order to connect the dots between neighborhoods and schools to properly identify potential and existing safe routes for school children to travel. Observation and confirmation is then done to ensure routes are safely walkable and bikeable through repeat surveying.

Education can include ensuring students are familiar with and properly aware of how to navigate their own neighborhoods, instruction in basic pedestrian and bicycle safety, teaching students the rules of the road from an early age and instilling the need to look left, right, and left again before crossing, etc. This can be achieved creatively by conducting events such as bike rodeos where equipment safety checks are performed, students learn safe traffic techniques and how to navigate obstacles, etc.

Encouragement can be undertaken through means such as informational assemblies, the establishment of biking and walking clubs, rewards programs that further encourage fitness and healthy eating, promotion during public events such as parades, the establishment of walking school buses and/or rolling bicycle trains which would be undertaken with adult supervision and escorts, etc. These types of encouragement exercises coupled with adult support further lends safety in numbers whenever students walk and bike to school, which also helps “take back” neighborhoods thereby diminishing concerns such as bullying and violence. To that end, Mr. Corrigan noted that October is International Walk-to-School Month, which provides an excellent opportunity to undertake such efforts.

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Enforcement requires the essential participation of local police to help combat issues such as speeding motorists and non-compliance with stopping for marked crosswalk areas.

Engineering, or infrastructure improvements, provides any necessary physical changes to promote bicycling and walking to school. This is commonly characterized by the concepts of “signs, signals and stripes” which provide the necessary constructs to ensure sufficient sidewalks, biking areas, crossings, signs and demarcations for students to have safe routes *all the way* to school. A task force must work with qualified, professional engineers (either private or local public works departments) from preliminary engineering through the bidding process, and into construction engineering as required by the Federal Highway Administration. In particular regard to the general grant, cost elements need to be as accurate as possible.

Mr. Corrigan shared several examples of successfully completed SRTS projects in NH, including images. He noted that safe routes can be shared but separate from traffic, and that full school bike racks are a familiar indication of a successful program.

Mr. Corrigan described that SRTS is a competitive funding program in which applications are considered against one another and awarded on the basis of merit and available funds. A successful application requires effective community planning and wide representation within the task force membership. The home-to-school connection must be documented and the plans must be cost-effective. Creative solutions are always advantageous, for example, engaging community members and/or groups such as a senior citizens organizations to assist with escorting students who bike and walk to school. Special consideration is lent to communities with limited resources.

Mr. Corrigan outlined the three tiers of the SRTS funding program: startup grants of less than \$5000 to assist communities with initial planning and non-infrastructure programs; travel plan grants of up to \$15,000 per school for more detailed planning; general grants for comprehensive infrastructure and/or non-infrastructure programs of up to \$100,000 for those developed without a travel plan or up to \$250,000 for those developed with a travel plan. To date, the NH SRTS program has awarded five rounds of funding with a 6th round now planned for the Fall of 2012. Further details pertaining to the 6th round of funding will become available in July, but rolling applications for startups and travel plans may be submitted in the interim.

Following Mr. Corrigan’s presentation, Mrs. Bull opened the floor to comments and questions.

Mr. Flood described that areas in residential neighborhoods around Baboosic Lake Road are often not wide enough to accommodate walkers and riders alongside traffic and wondered if there were recommended widths for such interests. Mr. Corrigan indicated that would be the type of question best pursued via professional engineering.

Mr. Corrigan provided several application suggestions to the committee, stating that the current copy of the application would need to be revised in the near future. New application forms

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provide a space for budget information on the first page for easy point of reference. He indicated the committee could also take the opportunity to refine budgetary information. He questioned the inclusion of traffic counts along several streets as indicated in the original application, stating that is something more often identified following the surveying process and the ability to better connect the dots for travel routes between residential neighborhoods and schools. Mrs. Bull, Mr. Flood and Mr. Waitkins clarified that traffic counts for streets such as School Street, Bishop Street, O’Gara Drive, McElwain Street and Baboosic Lake Road were outlined within the application because those roads immediately feed the Masticola Elementary School complex, including those leading directly to school entrances, but that other roads would also be looked at once surveying results were known. Mrs. Bull inquired about the need to renew any letters of support, and he indicated those were no longer a requirement of the travel plan process; only for the general grant process.

Mr. Corrigan reiterated the need for wide municipal representation within the task force. Mr. Flood and Mrs. Bull explained that while the Merrimack School District served as the grant applicant in this case, the Merrimack SRTS Travel Plan Task Force is actually a subcommittee of the Town Center Committee, which he chairs and on which she represents the School District. Mrs. Bull continued that pursuing this grant has therefore required considerable cooperation between entities from both the town and the school district, and while the subcommittee is well-represented by many members of the school community in attendance at the meeting, the membership also includes Community Outreach Officer Rob Kelleher, and several residents who walk for exercise and leisure in the town center area.

Mr. Flood stated that one creative solution might be to encourage older, high school-aged students to assist in escorting younger, elementary school-aged students to school. Mrs. Bull and Principal McGill indicated that start and end times varied between the school levels, with high school students beginning and being released earliest (approximately 7:30am to 2:15pm), and the elementary students beginning and ending later (approximately 8:30am to 2:40pm at James Masticola Elementary School and 8:40am to 3:00pm at Masticola Upper Elementary School), so such a proposal would have to be carefully planned with the high school as older students would already be in class when younger students were travelling to school.

Mr. Flood described the idea of implementing drop-off points for students being driven in from further distances in order to alleviate some traffic congestion. Mr. Corrigan emphasized the benefit of having such drop-off points being located far enough away from the schools so as to still encourage walking some distance, such as half a mile. He further stated that one situation which commonly, yet adversely affects school bus routes in terms of time length is the inclusion of too many drop-off and pick-up points. If more students were encouraged to congregate at collective pick-up and drop-off sites, not only could route times be shortened, more students would benefit from added daily spurts of walking.

Mr. Waitkins noted that the committee’s application was originally submitted at the end of January 2012, and asked if resubmitted on the updated application form, what might the lead time be in terms of final turnaround and approval? Mr. Corrigan indicated that a quick

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turnaround would be likely since the original application was strong and has already been submitted to initial review.

Mr. Waitkins asked to clarify if this meeting would satisfy the new SRTS pre-application meeting requirement, and Mr. Corrigan indicated that it would.

Mr. Corrigan noted that September is an ideal time to apply for a startup grant to offset any costs that might be incurred in organizing a walk-to-school event in October. He also mentioned the new requirement for Local Public Agency (LPA) certification of an employee of the applicant in order to undertake the development of projects such as those under the SRTS program. Certification for that person would then be good for three years. Mr. Waitkins indicated that he would coordinate with Mrs. Bull so that she can take information pertaining to this new requirement to the SAU Office.

The committee thanked Mr. Corrigan for his presentation and all the information he provided.

Mrs. Bull noted that the meeting time had passed the expected 4:30pm end time and stated that if the members present were willing, it would only take about ten additional minutes to walk through the remaining agenda items.

Mrs. Bull shared that the national SRTS Student Arrival and Departure Survey and SRTS Parent Survey About Walking and Biking to School had been conducted and collected as planned during April. She indicated that Mr. Waitkins was busy undertaking the task of entering data from the surveys into the national SRTS database and that once compiled, the committee could look forward to learning about the results during a future meeting.

Mrs. Bull stated that it would not be necessary for the committee to meet during the summer months, however, it would be wise now to tentatively set a meeting date in September. She indicated that the first day of classes for the 2012/13 school year would be Thursday, August 30, 2012, and that the third Tuesday in September would be the 18th. It was agreed that date would be tentatively set, and that Mrs. Bull would remind committee members via email of the meeting date as the school year commenced. Similarly, she suggested that members check their emails periodically as she may have news and/or updates to share across the summer months. She further indicated that she would be available during the summer months if committee members needed to reach her.

Mrs. Bull opened the floor to comments from committee members.

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She thanked the committee members for their participation to date. She explained that unexpected SRTS program changes to the requirements for the committee's work, some of which were covered by Mr. Corrigan, would extend the project's timetable into the new school year, but that she hoped most members were invested in the project and interested in continuing with the committee. She expressed her understanding that schedules and situations do change, noting the recent announcement of Ms. Mazzarella's upcoming retirement, and offered congratulations accordingly. Mrs. Bull stated that due to the meeting running over, she would follow up by week's end by emailing all members to that effect, requesting that anyone unable to continue contact her accordingly so that she may coordinate filling any openings with the Superintendent. She would also make note of the expected September meeting in that message.

Due to the hour and the need for several committee members to dismiss themselves early, Mrs. Bull formally adjourned the meeting at 4:50pm.