

Safe Routes to School Travel Plan Task Force – Meeting Minutes: 30 July 2013 (Page 1)

In attendance: Tracy Bull (Chair), Principal Emilie Carter (MES) (3:45pm), Bill Cummings, Rick Greenier, Officer Rob Kelleher, Sarah Ruffell, Matt Waitkins (NRPC)

Excused members: Asst. Principal Jay Gratton (MES), Principal Marsha McGill (JMUES), Leslie Rothman

Mrs. Bull welcomed committee members, thanking them for their availability to this summer meeting, and calling the meeting to order at 3:32pm.

Mrs. Bull requested a motion to accept the meeting minutes from May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013, which was made by Mr. Waitkins and seconded by Mrs. Ruffell. She made a request for any corrections or clarifications to the minutes. Mr. Waitkins stated that on Page 3 in the paragraph pertaining to comments and questions, it should be noted that as it pertains to applying for a large infrastructure grant (\$250,000), if the improvement were to occur on school district property, the Merrimack School District would need to serve as grant applicant. Mrs. Bull asked if an improvement were to occur on town property, if the Town would then serve as grant applicant. Mr. Waitkins stated that it would, so Mrs. Bull indicated she would reflect both clarifications in the revisions. The minutes were approved by a vote of 5-0-1, with Mr. Cummings abstaining.

Mrs. Bull stated that the parent and student surveys and mapping exercises were completed at James Mastricola Elementary School (MES) and James Mastricola Upper Elementary School (JMUES) during the first week of June 2013, and that Mr. Waitkins and fellow staff from the Nashua Regional Planning Commission (NRPC) have been busy compiling data since. She further noted that the steering committee was still on track to have the travel plan document completed by late September 2013 in order to afford the Town and the School District to determine their interest in applying for the 7<sup>th</sup> and final round of Safe Routes infrastructure grant funding, worth up to \$250,000 of project cost reimbursement.

Mr. Waitkins shared that the 7<sup>th</sup> round of funding was initially expected to open to applications in September, but has since been pushed further out pending the completion of existing Round 6 funding projects. At the present time, the 7<sup>th</sup> round of funding will likely become open to applications during October 2013 or sometime soon thereafter.

Mr. Waitkins distributed copies of compiled survey data outcomes to those committee members in attendance. He requested that everyone lend some time to reviewing the draft information during the next two weeks for any comments or suggestions they may have to share. He further indicated he would continue to work on the draft during that time. Mrs. Bull requested that

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he forward an electronic copy of the draft document so that it could be shared with all members, including those unavailable to attend this summer meeting.

Mr. Waitkins stated that the data contained in this draft reflected combined responses from both the MES and the JMUES surveys, but that the data can be further separated and viewed by school, grade, etc. He walked committee members through the draft survey results page by page, highlighting various points along the way.

Mr. Waitkins noted that the results regarding how students currently travel to school versus how they would prefer to do so were quite different. The vast majority of students fell into one of two categories: 28% are presently being driven and 68% ride the bus. However, 13% of respondents indicated they would prefer to walk, 31% would prefer to bike, 23% would prefer to be driven, 24% would prefer to take the bus, 7% would prefer to skate, and the remaining 2% would prefer to travel to school via some other means. Similar data was provided as to how students currently travel home from school.

When asked why they do not currently walk or bike to school, student responses reflected a variety of reasons. The two largest responses included 19% indicating their parents do not currently allow them to do so, and 16% indicated they lived too far to do so. 64% of students indicated they believed it would be fun to walk or bike to school, while 36% indicated their perception is that it would be boring to do so. 99% of students indicated they believe walking to school to be a healthy option, while 1% did not. 53% indicated they felt it was currently safe for them to walk to school, whereas 47% did not. 84% indicated they believed biking would be a fun way to travel to school, but 16% did not. 98% felt biking to school would be a healthy option, and 2% did not. 56% believe current conditions for biking to school are safe, and 44% do not.

With respect to current attention to getting regular exercise, 83% of students indicated they already do so daily, 11% indicated doing so twice per week, 5% once per week, and 2% indicated they do not participate in getting regular exercise.

Mr. Waitkins explained that only 56 parent responses were received to the request to participate in the online survey format provided by the NRPC. Mrs. Carter affirmed the initiative for parent surveys was supported by letters sent home with students from each of the school's principals, coupled with email communications from the respective parent/teacher groups. Despite lower than anticipated participation, overall outcomes from the parent survey yielded relatively similar results to the student surveys regarding how students currently travel to and from school. With respect to indicating why their students currently do not walk or bike to school, 1% of parents indicated their child already does walk or bike, 18% cited issues with crosswalks or intersections, 21% indicated inadequate sidewalks, 19% cited traffic concerns, 12% indicated distance, 5% cited weather, 14% cited concerns over crime, 2% indicated conflicts with other activities, 3% cited issues with student gear, and 5% indicated other non-specific issues.

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Some 73% of parents indicated they would be in favor of an encouragement program designed to afford more students the opportunity to bike and walk to school. 41% of parent respondents indicated they would allow their students to walk or bike to school if improvements were made along their respective routes, while 30% indicated they still would not. 27% indicated they would consider doing so under improved conditions.

A majority of responding parents indicated agreement that walking and biking can increase alertness in school, plus help students develop a healthy lifestyle and skills such as self-reliance. Of the parents who did participate, 2% indicated they resided  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile or less from school, 4% indicated between  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile, 14% indicated between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and 1 mile, 36% indicated between 1 and 2 miles, and 45% indicated they resided 2 or more miles from their student's school.

Mr. Waitkins indicated that the various data gathered can be cross-tabbed in a variety of ways, plus spread sheets could be created for each of the two individual schools. Mrs. Bull stated she believed the School District and School Board would appreciate being able to view information in various ways.

Looking ahead, committee members engaged in some dialogue regarding what kinds of improvements might need to be considered. Officer Kelleher inquired about types of sidewalks, suggesting that for biking in particular, paths of travel would likely need to be level with the ground rather than raised, such as a sidewalk. Mr. Waitkins stated it would be valuable to verify any age requirements which exist in Merrimack as they pertain to minors bicycling on the road versus on sidewalks. He also stated that he anticipates conducting a sidewalk inventory soon relevant to the overall study area.

Officer Kelleher stated he believes the State of NH owns the bridge comprising the section of Baboosic Lake Road which spans the Everitt Turnpike, which should also be verified. He suggested that a guardrail separating the sidewalk from the road might be beneficial for increased pedestrian safety. Even with that, issues of road width affording safe bicycling alongside traffic and pedestrians could still be an issue on the bridge. Mrs. Bull offered a comparison to another recommended pedestrian connection generated by the iTrac Project (2009) along Daniel Webster Highway over Baboosic Brook near the Twin Bridge area, describing how thought processes in that instance included a pedestrian and biking area physically separated from the road in order to maximize safety. She explained that such an improvement might benefit the bridge over the Everitt Turnpike. That level of project would involve more engineering, expense and construction effort than a regular sidewalk, but in deference to existing road and sidewalk space versus traffic volumes and pedestrian safety concerns, it should at least be discussed.

Mrs. Bull noted that she has publicly stated during prior updates and presentations before other committees and boards that she anticipates recommendations for more than one viable project

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will ultimately come from the final Safe Routes travel plan report. In that regard, it is important for committee members to share all their thoughts, ideas and suggestions, as well as ask relevant questions accordingly, as this vetting process will help yield the most comprehensive final report.

Mr. Waitkins shared a rough draft map from data compiled by so far from the MES mapping exercise, noting that data processing on the mapping portion of the surveys was still in progress. He stated that route plotting is taking place, but integration of symbols and related information has not yet. The broader lines demonstrate where more students share concurrent travel routes. For instance, the heaviest area on Baboosic Lake Road stands out most since it is where most student traffic converges into the Mastricola Complex. Mrs. Bull stated she will be interested to see what students are indicating as unsafe areas along their school routes.

Mrs. Carter shared that in Grades 3 & 4 at MES, efforts were undertaken to have students work in groups on the mapping exercise, for instance students who take the same bus routes. Student groups were guided by adult faculty and staff to ensure map understanding, etc. She explained that data outcomes will also be useful to the school in other ways. She also looks forward to sharing the data outcomes with 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade participants who will be returning as 4<sup>th</sup> Graders in the fall. She felt they enjoyed and appreciated participating in the survey process and looks forward to keeping them engaged as the Safe Routes project moves forward.

Mr. Waitkins described that he will continue to integrate information into the report template, which will include data discussed during this meeting, data gathered from all the mapping exercises conducted in Grades 3 through 6, plus the traffic count data collected previously. When the draft is more complete in a few weeks, he will email it out to committee members for their review, and they may offer their comments and suggestions to him via email. Mrs. Bull reminded everyone that in forwarding electronic feedback to Mr. Waitkins, it is important not to engage in a back-and-forth dialogue due to Right to Know Law. Information integrated into the travel plan document will all be publicly discussed and vetted.

Mr. Cummings inquired whether it would be suitable to offer feedback to Mr. Waitkins via telephone or voice message. Mr. Waitkins indicated that it would. Mrs. Bull stated she would provide email and telephone contact information for Mr. Waitkins to all committee members via email.

Mrs. Bull requested any comments or questions from committee members. Seeing none, she recommended everyone present consider and discuss potential upcoming meeting dates, stating she would envision two more meetings in order to complete work on reviewing data and travel plan drafts. She noted that August does present scheduling challenges as it is still

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summer recess for multiple committee members, many of whom will be further engaged in back-to-school exercises during the last week of the month. It was agreed that an August meeting would best be determined by a consensus of committee members via email response once Mr. Waitkins has distributed the next draft and all have had time to review.

Mrs. Bull asked that committee members consider an appropriate date for the September meeting. Mr. Cummings offered that the third Tuesday in September would be the 17<sup>th</sup>. Noting that school would only be underway for two weeks by that date, Mrs. Bull suggested considering the 24<sup>th</sup> instead. Committee members in attendance agreed that September 24<sup>th</sup> @ 3:30pm would be suitable meeting date. She further mentioned it was probable that public presentations before the School Board, Town Center Committee, and perhaps even the Town Council, in regards to the final travel plan report will become likely, advising committee members to expect that multiple members would be called upon to participate alongside herself and Mr. Waitkins once that time comes.

Mrs. Bull requested a motion to adjourn, made by Mr. Greenier, seconded by Mr. Waitkins. The motion passed unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 4:40pm.