

Chattanooga-Hamilton County Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program Report September 2006

Program Partnership: Activate Chattanooga Coalition (See Partnership Information)

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Partnership Information:

For any project to be eligible to receive financial support to implement Safe Routes to School, the national transportation legislation identifies that the project must be part of a comprehensive communitywide effort. The Chattanooga-Hamilton County SRTS Program is coordinated by staff at the Regional Planning Agency, but many of the responsibilities are shared amongst the partners of Activate Chattanooga. An important benefit of such a coordinated effort is that all participating partners will be eligible to apply for SRTS funds as a result of combining each of their own individual agency's or organization's contribution into one larger effort. Activate Chattanooga, as a loose coalition, is always looking for new partners and efficiently utilizes partners' abilities to effectively facilitate and promote progress of the SRTS. Meetings are usually held every other month on a day and time most convenient to the majority. Partnership information, meeting minutes and agendas, and program progress is available on the Worldwide Web under Activate Chattanooga on the Bike Chattanooga website at www.bikechattanooga.org. (See Attachment A for a list of current partners)

School Information:

Currently there are nine participating schools all within the Hamilton County Department of Education School District. There are three middle and six elementary schools. Eight of these schools affect communities in the City of Chattanooga, the county's largest municipal government. The ninth directly affects a smaller geographically separated community in the incorporated Town of Signal Mountain. According to the State of Tennessee 2005 School Report Cards for Hamilton County, five of the nine schools have an economically disadvantaged student population of 75% or greater. Lower Income and poverty populations often do not have personal automobiles thus walking or biking are common modes of travel. In addition, Hamilton County Department of Education has a school bus policy that limits routine stops to areas outside a half mile radius of the school. Though this policy exists, no formalized local government capital funding mechanism exists to improve the infrastructure to those neighborhoods surrounding the school to make it safe for students to walk or bike to school. Since older generations depended more heavily on walking, schools located within older urban neighborhoods have a good network of sidewalks, but may be in desperate need of maintenance or replacement. Such maintenance issues further complicate sidewalk improvements for the City of Chattanooga because their public works policy for sidewalk repair in residential areas places this burden on the homeowner. (See Attachment B for maps of each school)

Program Information:

The comprehensive requirement mentioned above is further defined as the 5 E's of Safe Routes to School programming: Education, Encouragement, Evaluation, Engineering, and Enforcement. The partners of Activate Chattanooga are continuously working to establish program measures for each of these components. All measures will be applied to each participating school. Due to

limited resources the first year, all Hamilton County schools were prioritized using the following ranking criteria to narrow the number of schools in which the program will be offered.

2006-2007 Chattanooga-Hamilton County SRTS School Selection Criteria

- The school must be an elementary or middle school.
- There must be an identifiable neighborhood having a population of enrollees within 2 miles of the school.
- There are identifiable existing safety concerns for an existing population of students.
- There are identifiable traffic congestion and safety concerns for the community.
- Existing infrastructure makes it possible for an existing population of students to walk or bike to school.

A total of 15 schools were selected. The school principals were sent program packets and invited to participate. A deadline to register for participation was set and no additional schools were accepted after the deadline. Any school not meeting the deadline could request to continue receiving information, continue to be part of Activate Chattanooga, and was encouraged to continue discussions about the program with their parents and teachers. Activate Chattanooga expects to expand the program to as many additional schools as resources will allow for the 2007-2008 school year, but that will depend heavily on the partnership's ability to secure funds for project management, education classes, and public awareness materials. Details of the 2006-2007 program components are outlined below.

Education

Chattanooga-Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency has received a \$10K grant from the Lyndhurst Foundation to provide participating schools bicycle and pedestrian safety classes which will be taught during regular physical education, lunch, special auditorium gatherings, or after school programs depending on each principal's preference. The classes will be taught by certified professionals. Bicycle programming will teach students proper traffic etiquette and the Rules of Road according to instruction of the League of American Bicyclists. In addition, Activate Chattanooga is working to determine effective safety materials that can be distributed to the schools, parents, and teachers utilizing existing materials from other successful program across the U.S.

Encouragement

Activate Chattanooga has been attending school functions such as registration, open house, and PTA meetings to create awareness and generate interest about Safe Routes to School. Informative brochures, flyers, and contact sheets are distributed at each function. Contact information of each parent and teacher interested in the program is helping Activate Chattanooga build specific school coordinating committees. These committees will assist Activate Chattanooga in tailoring Safe Routes to School to meet the needs of that particular school and neighborhood. Each school's coordinating committee has at least five individuals: the school principal, the parent/teacher specialist, a parent, the guidance counselor or physical education instructor, and a representative of Activate Chattanooga. The Regional Planning Agency is working to secure additional grant funds to conduct a countywide public awareness campaign to publicize the program, its community and health benefits, and generate excitement towards walking and biking to school.

Evaluation

An Initial conditions assessment including walking and biking observations and traffic accident research is currently underway, but the partnership expects the assessment to be complete by October 2006. This assessment will be conducted each year and will become a critical component of project selection for each school. Since this was a new program in Hamilton County, projects are being prioritized by safety and access needs. In addition to these

infrastructure and travel mode assessments, a basic exercise survey is being completed by parents to determine how they feel about the physical activity level of their children and whether they would be interested in a walking and biking program at their school. These evaluations will be compiled and summaries provided in a mid-year report for the entire Chattanooga-Hamilton County Safe Routes to School Program. The next year's surveys will build upon the first by introducing new questions related to the progress of Safe Routes to School. Other, more detailed, surveys may be given to parents and student regarding health and physical exercise. These results will also be compiled and summarized in the mid- or year- end report.

Engineering

Engineers and planners for the City of Chattanooga and Hamilton County are assessing travel modes for each participating school and plan to document the existing number of students walking or biking and the potential number of students that could walk or bike to within a two mile radius. Since there are several magnet schools that are participating in the Chattanooga-Hamilton County SRTS program, obtaining data only for those students living within the two mile radius, zoned for that school, and attend that school must be determined to gain an accurate target population and program boundary. At present, Activate Chattanooga is only encouraging students and parents within a one-mile radius due to existing infrastructure limitations and minimal volunteer assistance. Interested parents and students outside the one-mile radius, but within the two-mile radius are still welcome to participate.

Enforcement

A presentation was given to the regional Advisory Council on Traffic Safety to introduce the SRTS program in April of 2006. Since that initial presentation, Activate Chattanooga gained several law enforcement members including the Director of the Hamilton County School Patrol. During the early stages of preparation and assessment there has not been a need for services other than verbal communication, but the officers have acknowledge their support of the program and plan to provide assistance in designating the most appropriate routes for walking and biking, the safest crossing areas, and potential hazards. The City of Chattanooga Bike Patrol is active in local promotion of bicycling and has expressed interest in assisting in educational efforts as well.

Examples of Draft Project Proposals:

Non-Infrastructure Projects

Program Management: Staff Support

The Regional Planning Agency has provide a staff person to organize, coordinate, and direct implementation of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Safe Routes to School program under the guidance and support of Activate Chattanooga. Although this staff person has been able to adequately ignite this new program in Hamilton County, TN, the program is continuously growing, gaining more partners, and generating more energy. This progress is rapidly outgrowing the abilities of one person. The need has arisen for additional staff to manage administrative paperwork, collect and research data, and outreach to potential new schools in the future.

School Programming: Bike Club

During early discussions with the participating schools, some schools indicated a strong desire to develop a school bicycle club. This club will provide education, instruction, and events focused around biking to and from school. Due to financial limitations for most schools, this type of program would demand outside funding to become successful. Funding would be used to hire a part-time coordinator, purchase of bicycles, transport equipment and bike safety and repair equipment. The group would be encouraged to conduct fund-raising events to buy club t-shirts, bicycle apparel, and bicycle related giveaways.

Infrastructure Projects

Big Ridge Elementary

Initial Problem: Currently no safe conditions exist for any student to walk or bike to school. The frontage road is narrow and carries a significant amount of traffic daily. The unsafe conditions for walking or biking are heightened during morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up. Rear entry to the school is currently prohibited and this access road is more narrow and steep in topography.

Potential Walkers/Bikers: There are several neighborhoods within the one-mile radius that if provided the opportunity could utilize a sidewalk or multi-use path for walking or biking. A currently disconnected greenway could provide an additional neighborhood the opportunity to walk or bike to school within the two-mile radius.

Necessary Improvements:

- Sidewalks on frontage road
- Sidewalks or multi-use path connection to existing greenway

Chattanooga Middle

Initial Problem: A portion of economically disadvantaged students walk from a remote neighborhood where a couple of extremely unsafe conditions exist for pedestrian activity. In addition, in front of the school there are no crosswalks or pedestrian friendly crossing areas.

Potential Walkers/Bikers: The school is situated adjacent to a large residential neighborhood with a good network of sidewalks and on-street bicycle facilities which could potentially draw a large number of walkers and bikers with proper education and traffic calming.

Necessary Improvements:

- Re-evaluate and redesign sidewalk and bicycle connections to underserved neighborhoods
- Install crosswalks and/or pedestrian friendly crossing areas
- Bike Racks at school

Battle Academy

Initial Problem: Traffic congestion is creating unsafe conditions for existing walkers.

Potential Walkers/Bikers: The school is located in a newly renovated urban district seeking to encourage new residents. This push to increase the residential population could bring a significant amount of new families considering the school is located just half a mile to a mile away from these revitalized areas in the district.

Necessary Improvements:

- Designate a central point for pedestrian crossings
- Redesign the crosswalks
- Re-evaluate pedestrian signage