



## SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL: A PLANNING TOOL FOR EVERYONE! PART 1 OF 4

“Children are one third of our population and all of our future.” –select panel for the Promotion of Child Health, 1981

### **PLANNERS AND THE SAFE ROUTES 2 SCHOOL PROGRAM**

Schools and the communities in which they are located are inextricably tied. “Healthy” schools often add to a strong and vibrant region. Historically, schools, particularly elementary schools, were located within a safe walking or biking distance to the residential areas within its boundaries. This also led to building local connections and relationships.

#### **The purposes of Safe Routes to School (SR2S) programs are:**

- To enable and encourage children, including those with disabilities, to walk and bicycle to school;
- To make bicycling and walking to school a safer and more appealing transportation alternative, thereby encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age;
- To facilitate the planning, development, and implementation of projects and activities that will improve safety and reduce traffic, fuel consumption, and air pollution in the vicinity of elementary schools.

The trend has been away from this in recent years, to the detriment of both the community and the students. The SR2S program provides funding to schools to implement projects that encourage walking and biking to school.

Community planners should be encouraged by this program, and seek to work closely with local schools and other professionals. By providing their expertise and knowledge to local schools, planners can:

- Facilitate school improvements that are consistent with the planning goals of the community
- Institutionalize the concept of the planning community and SR2S working together to advance walkable and healthy communities
- Bridge the planning disconnect that often happens between school districts and community planning
- Offer a win-win solution to such growing concerns as traffic congestion and safety, busing costs, health, and student performance
- Utilize a funding source for planning efforts and implementation
- Maximize on a tremendous opportunity for improvement in our urban centers; an area of critical focus for Michigan’s future.

The Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) has obtained a grant through the Governors Council

on Physical Fitness that contains many elements, all of which seek to encourage local government to work closely with schools to encourage biking and walking to school, and more broadly, to ensure that the connection between the school and the community is strengthened. Planners can play a critical role in advancing the program, through advocacy to local schools, review of projects, and educating schools about best practices for improvements. The major thrust of MAP’s effort is to market, promote, and explain the program to community planners, and other professionals from related fields, so that they can help advance the program to their communities and local schools.

The MAP project includes education through the monthly magazine, fliers, a Frequently Asked Questions brochure; policy and legislative work that dovetails with MAP’s established school and local government policy, and upcoming legislative initiatives and conference topics.

### **WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?**

There is direct correlation between our environment, our health and the opportunities we have to be active. The level of physical inactivity and overweight rates among all age groups have risen to the level of a public health crisis in the United States. The number of overweight children and teens has doubled and

tripled in just 20 years. Results of this include a 10-fold increase in Type-2 (adult onset) diabetes among children from 1982 to 1994. This impact is not only affecting our waistlines, but also our pockets through skyrocketing medical expenses.

## MICHIGAN TAKES THE LEAD

In 2003, the Michigan Department of Transportation, through the Federal Highway Administration Transportation Enhancement Program, funded a two-year state Safe Routes to School pilot project which was administered by the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness/Michigan Fitness Foundation. The purpose of the project was to develop materials and procedures to help Michigan elementary schools begin and sustain SR2S initiatives.

Pilot program accomplishments include:

- Forming an active, multi-disciplinary state coalition of more than 25 agencies, departments, non-profits, for-profits, and elementary school representatives;
- Forming 11 pilot elementary school/community SR2S teams (rural/urban/suburban and low-income), which have continued their program past the two-year pilot effort;
- Administering surveys to learn parents' and students' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors;
- Developing Michigan's SR2S logo and social marketing material;
- Producing a comprehensive, user-friendly handbook and locally customizable materials; and
- Developing an SR2S training program for school and community stakeholders with a training curriculum which parallels the handbook.

The pilot project drew heavily on the considerable talents of the coalition and its steering committee,

which included representatives from the Michigan Association of Planning, Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance, the League of Michigan Bicyclists, Michigan State University's Department of CARRS (Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies), the American Heart Association, Michigan State University Extension/Michigan Nutrition Network, the Michigan chapter of SAFE Kids USA, the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Michigan State Police, and the Michigan Departments of Community Health, Education, and Transportation.

Michigan's Safe Routes to School program is managed by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), with training, logistical, administrative, and technical support from the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sports. A state coalition and steering committee provides leadership for all aspects of the program.

A federal Safe Routes to School program was authorized as part of the surface transportation bill signed into law in August 2005. As a result, every state now has dedicated dollars to help with infrastructure improvements (e.g. new sidewalks and traffic calming projects) and non-infrastructure activities to encourage and enable students to walk and bicycle to school.

## STAY TUNED!

Future articles will address details such as:

- The SR2S Handbook (filled with templates and tools for instant implementation) and tips on the suggested planning process
- Statistics and baseline information from pilot schools tracking results
- Details on the grant application and funding

## PROGRAM BACKGROUND

- The federal SR2S program was enacted with passage of the federal Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) in August of 2005.
- The statute authorizes \$612 million nationwide for a five-year period ending September 2009.
- Funding is distributed to each state in proportion to the state's share of the national student enrollment in grades K-8; schools serving this population are eligible for SR2S projects.
- Michigan's allocation totals \$19 million, divided among five annual apportionments.
- The SR2S program is administered by the Office of Transportation Economic Development and Enhancement (TEDE) of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT).

- Success stories from pilot school projects
- Future steps such as Safe Route to Work initiatives

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For additional information contact the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sports/Michigan Fitness Foundation at 1.800.434.8642 or visit the Web pages: [www.michiganfitness.org](http://www.michiganfitness.org) or [www.saferoutesmichigan.org](http://www.saferoutesmichigan.org).



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