



Safe Routes to School and Community Planners: Part 4

The Safe Routes to School (SR2S) Program is an international movement that makes it safe, convenient, and fun for children to walk or bike to school. The philosophies of the SR2S program parallel many objectives advanced by community planners; partnerships between community planners and the schools within their jurisdictions are a natural progression that should be nurtured and encouraged.

Over the last year, MAP has covered the topic in three issues of the *Michigan Planner* magazine. This fourth installment addresses the role of community planners as advocates for including schools and neighborhoods in the master planning process through community engagement and outreach. Two future installments will feature details about incorporating SR2S principles in the local master plan and will highlight changes that can be made to zoning codes and regulations that make it easier to institutionalize SR2S concepts at the local level.

WHY PLANNERS?

Planners are uniquely qualified to link SR2S philosophies to the comprehensive planning process in municipalities. Planners bring to the table leadership expertise, design capabilities, knowledge of sustainable

planning principles, and the ability to coalesce community leaders, school officials, parents, and residents behind a local planning effort. SR2S principles dovetail well with the goals of community planners—who are keenly interested in the physical layout of our communities; with how things “fit”; and how the configuration of land uses support – or detract from – the development of vital, connected, and healthy communities.

Planners can effectively advance and institutionalize the SR2S concepts which create communities that are more walkable, safe, and environmentally sustainable through the master planning process.



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Well-planned schools that are integrated within the community encourage walking and biking to school, resulting in outcomes that are embraced by both SR2S and local government: connected communities with transportation alternatives which strengthen the nexus between schools, their neighborhoods, and the community at large.

UPDATING YOUR MASTER PLAN TO INCLUDE SR2S PRINCIPLES

As the master planning process evolved over recent decades, more and more communities included innovative techniques addressing connectivity, walkability, neighborhood design, safety, and alternative transportation systems, elements also embraced by the SR2S program. Planners can address issues related to schools in their master planning efforts, and embed SR2S principles in adopted master plans that include both broad and specific goals and actions.

Although each community's master plan addresses the unique characteristics of that community, typical master plans have common elements consistent from community to community, including background studies, existing and future land use maps, goals, objectives and strategies, and policy statements. A master plan might also include recommendations for transportation systems; housing; economic development; parks, recreation and open space; downtowns or other geographic subareas; utilities; public buildings and spaces; and others.



A community's master planning process should include innovative techniques addressing connectivity, walkability, neighborhood design, safety, and alternative transportation systems, elements embraced by the SR2S program.

planners contact a broad spectrum of local stakeholders in their outreach activities: representatives from neighborhood associations; social service, business and economic development organizations; transportation authorities; environmental groups; and interested citizens. Including school representatives is a logical extension of typical community engagement techniques, and can broaden the discussion about neighborhood planning to include walkability, community connections, energy consumption, and health, as they relate to specific school sites.

GETTING STARTED

Take the following simple steps to engage school officials into the planning process:

1. Map the location of all schools within the planning jurisdiction, and identify school type (elementary, middle, high school)
2. Identify and map the attendance area for each school
3. Create a contact list of school administrators for each school
4. Contact the appropriate school representative, introduce the SR2S program if they are not familiar with it, emphasize the importance of cooperation between schools and government planning processes, cite the benefits of walkability and connected schools and neighborhoods, identify the ways that school and neighborhood connectivity can be incorporated into the master plan, and invite the representative to participate as a member of the community's planning team
5. Community engagement and input techniques used by planners include visioning sessions, community preference surveys, community workshops or forums, surveys, focus groups, design charrettes, one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders, formation of stakeholder steering

WHY THE DISCONNECT?

Why has planning for schools that are integrated into the fabric of neighborhoods and the community fallen out of favor in recent years? At one time, planners regularly considered school placement and connectivity as an integral part of the community planning process; they conducted population forecasts to anticipate areas of growth of school age children; identified appropriate school sites to accommodate those increases; and applied locational standards to ensure that children could safely walk or bike to their neighborhood school. Case law and zoning challenges to government authority over school construction and improvements, have eroded local control over school development and resulted in parallel planning efforts--school districts planning for schools and local government planning for everything else, with little communication between the entities. The SR2S Program can link the planning processes, strengthen relationships, and create communities where walking and biking to school is the norm.

committee, creation of subcommittees to address specific issues, topics, or geographic locations, public presentations to local community groups, open houses, blogs, plan newsletters, and others-- include school representatives in any appropriate engagement mechanism used by the community.

Schools can and should be integral to the master planning process. The planning process itself creates a mechanism, to plan for school and neighborhood connectivity, resulting in communities that are safe, convenient, and fun for children to walk or bike to school.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND CITIZEN INPUT

Community engagement is the first step in any master planning effort. While public hearings are statutorily required to allow for community input during the adoption phase of a master plan, most communities include residents and local stakeholders in the planning process long before the plan is ready to be adopted. Planners recognize that a master plan should represent the views of the residents, and work hard to learn those views in advance of and during the planning process.

A goal of planners, to engage the community before and during the planning process, is an ideal shared by the SR2S program. In fact, "visioning," a technique used regularly by community planners to gather community input, is a cornerstone of the SR2S program. The similarities between the SR2S approach to community engagement, and methods typically advanced by planners, are striking.

INCLUDING SCHOOLS IN YOUR COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS

Schools are among many local groups that should be engaged during the community planning process. Typically, community

