

# Bridging Barriers

## How Jackson's Safe Routes to School Project Connects Schools, Parks, and People

Having a variety of efficient modes of transportation makes getting around a community seamless and makes living easier. The City of Jackson, home to 32,000 residents, takes pride in its long history of providing excellent transportation services which continues through today. Its commitment to active transportation is also visible in its impressive trail system.

While there are numerous trails and parks, it hasn't always been easy to use them, and in particular for students to access them to walk, bike, or roll to and from school safely.

The city began working with the Michigan Fitness Foundation Safe Routes to School (SRTS) team on several small-scale projects to bring safe walking and rolling options to local children.

As the city started looking at the proximity of their schools to the city parks, they had an epiphany: Jackson's parks and trails system could be tied together through a SRTS project focused on safe walking and rolling routes for students at two of its schools (Sharp Park Academy and the Middle School at Parkside).

With these great ideas in hand, local leaders understood that the project could only succeed with community input and support.

"What you learn about your community is very valuable," said Kriss Giannetti, Assistant Superintendent of Communications and Community Outreach at Jackson Public Schools. "We hear that it's not safe. When we did walking audits, we really got a sense of what we were up against and what our students faced every day." From the walking audits, a list of infrastructure deficiencies was drawn up and from that list, the specifics of the project quickly took shape. Through public engagement efforts, the project earned the support of parents, students, teachers, and residents.



Family enjoying path with new non-motorized bridge in background.

Even with strong community support, the project was no walk in the park. Giannetti recalls the paperwork, countless meetings, and long-term timelines. Still, the opportunity was too good to miss. The City was already improving its roads and sidewalks and incorporating SRTS funding brought the biggest bang for their buck.

Perhaps the jewel of the project is a new non-motorized bridge. Although the initial idea emerged from the necessity of providing a route over a drainage basin, Jackson took the opportunity to go beyond mere necessity. Using city match funds within the grant, Jackson built a beautiful, ornate bridge mimicking a much older bridge nearby. This created a theme for the trail system and provided a symbol for the entire project.

Sidewalk repair and traffic calming priorities, identified and supported in the SRTS planning process, were addressed by the city outside of the SRTS funding with the addition of pedestrian refuge islands, other traffic calming elements,



The City of Jackson built onto its existing trail system assets and deepened inter-departmental relationships to complete a project where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Jackson added walking, biking, and rolling infrastructure impacting students and residents citywide for decades to come.

- **MDOT SRTS Infrastructure Investment: \$400,000**
- **MDOT SRTS Non-Infrastructure Investment: \$16,000**
- **City of Jackson Match Contribution: \$442,655**

This project was made possible through the continuing collaborative efforts of the City of Jackson, Jackson Public Schools, Michigan Fitness Foundation, Michigan Department of Transportation, and the Federal Highway Administration.

and lighting on the major street along the school property. With those safety priorities addressed, the SRTS funds were able to focus on segments of the trail system in disrepair. Whole sections were pushed back from the road to provide a larger buffer from automobiles to make it not only safer, but more inviting.

This work resulted in safe walking, biking, and rolling routes for countless students. In addition to keeping children out of harm's way on their school commute, the trails make it easier for children to be physically active traveling to and from school, offer an opportunity to socialize with friends, and help students get to know their community. These improvements allow kids to familiarize themselves with the parks along the route that they can in turn use for recreation with their families.

The improvements opened up the trail system to many new neighborhoods. "I don't think people always realize how hard it is for people to get from one location to another safely," said Kelli Hoover, Director of Parks, Recreation, and Grounds for Jackson. "Not everyone has or uses vehicles." The improvements to the trail system address those difficulties.

Assistant City Engineer Troy White observed, "We've built a durable enough path and cleared it wide enough that it should last decades." While children and youth were the primary target, everyone gets to use the paths.

**Kole Nicholoff** is a Transportation Planner at MDOT. He was the Safe Routes to School Intern at Michigan Fitness Foundation and is a recent graduate of the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program at Michigan State University. His work and research efforts have focused around improving public transportation and active transportation systems, with an emphasis on how these systems impact disadvantaged communities.



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