



## Doing Your Part and Speaking Up: *Ask Congress to Preserve Safe Routes to School Funding*

### **Background**

The federal Safe Routes to School program provides nearly \$200 million each year to states and local communities to support Safe Routes to School infrastructure and programs. It is funded by the federal transportation bill, which is currently up for reauthorization by Congress. Because the federal gas tax is no longer sufficient to support the current level of federal spending on transportation and due to the broader focus on cutting federal spending, it has been difficult for Congress to complete a transportation bill.

The House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee has released an outline of their transportation proposal. It would cut overall transportation spending by 35% and eliminate the Safe Routes to School program and dedicated funding, forcing Safe Routes to School projects to compete against much larger road and highway projects. This would likely mean very little funding for Safe Routes to School.

*We are at a critical time in the reauthorization of the federal transportation bill. Every Safe Routes to School supporter should contact their Members of Congress to ask them to protect Safe Routes to School funding.*

In the Senate, Senator Boxer (D-CA), Chair of the Environment and Public Works Committee has said that her bill will include Safe Routes to School. But we don't know what the policy language will look like, or what the funding level will be. Senator Inhofe (R-OK), the lead Republican on the Committee, has said he wants to eliminate funding for Safe Routes to School.

The current transportation bill extension expires September 30, 2011. Both the House and Senate will likely attempt to move forward with their transportation bills at some point in September. Even if they end up extending the current law, decisions could be made to cut back funding. That means that August and early September are important times for Safe Routes to School supporters to make sure their Members of Congress understand the importance of the Safe Routes to School program.

### **The Ask**

*Ask Members of Congress to support dedicated funding for Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements and Recreational Trails.* These three programs provide critical funding that allows communities to make it safe for kids and families to walk and bicycle to school and in daily life. Dedicated funding ensures that state Departments of Transportation prioritize bicycling and walking, and spend money on sidewalks, crosswalks, bike paths, education and encouragement.

## **What You Can Do**

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership has held hundreds of meetings with Congressional offices to build support for Safe Routes to School. Members of Congress know the benefits of Safe Routes to School. But, given this tough political environment, they must hear from their constituents that it is important. They need to hear from you! Here is how you can help:

**1. Send an email to your Senators and Representative to ask them to support dedicated funding for all three programs.**

**HOW?**

- Go to the “call to action” on our website at <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/national/763249>.
- Follow the link to Contact Congress—all you have to do is put in your zip code and contact information to send the suggested message to your Members

**2. Rally your friends, family members and your local Safe Routes to School volunteers and supporters during August to have them email their Senators and Representatives in support of dedicated funding for all three programs.**

**HOW?**

- Email your friends, families and SRTS supporters list to ask them to visit <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/national/763249> to contact Congress. Include a note explaining why SRTS is important and how it needs their help
- Post a call to action on your Facebook page
- Print out a flier with a call to action and hand out to parents and volunteers
- Include a story in your newsletter about the call to action

**3. Meet with the district office staff for your Senators and Representatives in August or September to ask for their support of dedicated funding for all three programs.**

**HOW?**

- Ask a couple community leaders and SRTS advocates to do the meeting with you
- Call the district office nearest you and ask to set up a meeting with the Member or their staff on bicycling and walking funding. To get contact information, go to <http://www.contactingthecongress.org/>, type in your address, and click on the Member’s name to see their district offices
- Prepare a few good examples of why Safe Routes to School and biking/walking funding is important to your community
- See the attached “Talking with Members of Congress” document as ideas for what to discuss at your meeting
- Report back on your meeting to [margo@saferoutespartnership.org](mailto:margo@saferoutespartnership.org)

**4. Get your Senators and Representatives out to see your Safe Routes to School program in action so they understand the importance of Safe Routes to School funding.**

**HOW?**

- Invite your Senators and Representative now to attend your Walk to School Day events in early October
- Or, when a Safe Routes to School infrastructure project is started or completed, hold a ground-breaking or ribbon-cutting ceremony
- Take a look at our Congressional Meetings and Event Toolkit at <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/national/164969/165778> for ideas on events, templates for materials, and tips
- Contact [margo@saferoutespartnership.org](mailto:margo@saferoutespartnership.org) for questions or to let us know about your events that Members attend

# **Talking with Members of Congress:**

## ***Share your Local Stories and your Passion—and Make the Ask!***

While you may be intimidated at the idea of talking with a Member of Congress or their staff about Safe Routes to School, it is not as hard as you may think. After all, you are the expert on Safe Routes to School in your community! Before a phone call or meeting, remember four key steps:

1. **DO SOME PREPARATION** ahead of time. Think about the local stories and examples you want to share that demonstrate the great things that federal bicycling and walking funds are making possible.
2. In the meeting, **MAKE THE KEY POINTS** about why Safe Routes to School, bicycling and walking are important in your community. See below for suggested talking points, and for recommendations on how to handle any tough questions that the Member or staff may ask.
3. Don't forget to **MAKE THE ASK**. Before the meeting ends, ask the Member of Congress or the staff person whether they will support Safe Routes to School and bicycling and walking funding.
4. **REPORT BACK** to the Safe Routes to School National Partnership. Email [margo@saferoutespartnership.org](mailto:margo@saferoutespartnership.org) to let her know who you met with and how it went, or if there are any questions you couldn't answer. Then we can follow up with the DC staff and ask for their support.

**Talking Points:** Use whichever of the talking points below best fit your community—and add local examples!

- **We understand that Congress is making tough decisions about which programs to fund in the transportation bill.** We are here today to discuss dedicated funding for bicycling and walking—specifically Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements and Recreational Trails.
- **Bicycling and walking are an important method of transportation for our community members.**
  - Nationally, 12% of transportation trips are bicycling and walking trips—yet we invest just 1.5% of federal transportation funding in this area.
  - Americans will make more than 4 billion bike trips and 42 billion walking trips this year, and bike commuting increased more than 40% between 2001 and 2008.
  - With high gas prices, bicycling and walking are affordable and cost-effective transportation options.
  - One-quarter of all the transportation trips that Americans make are less than a mile—an easy distance for walking or bicycling—but only if conditions are safe.
  - Federal transportation programs like Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements and Recreational Trails provide critical funding to build sidewalks, crosswalks and bikeways.
- **Safe Routes to School serves a unique purpose: improving safety around schools.**
  - For less than 1% of the federal transportation funding, Safe Routes to School is helping to improve safety around more than 10,000 schools nationwide.
  - 30% of children's traffic deaths occur when kids are walking or bicycling and are struck by cars.
  - Infrastructure improvements made through Safe Routes to School target high-risk areas where a lack of sidewalks and crosswalks, traffic volumes and traffic speeds create unsafe conditions for children.
  - Simply adding a sidewalk reduces by half the risk that a pedestrian will be struck. For each collision prevented, communities avoid tragedies and save money.
- **Safe Routes to School is a smart use of dollars.**
  - Making a one-time, low-cost investment like adding sidewalks can reduce long-term school busing costs and ease financial burdens on school systems.
  - Communities of all shapes and sizes—rural, suburban and urban—are competing for these dollars, and in some small towns Safe Routes to School funding has resulted in the town's first set of sidewalks—which also helps support access to local businesses.
  - A recent study of jobs through transportation infrastructure showed that pedestrian and bicycle construction projects generated nearly twice as many jobs as roadway construction.

- **Safe Routes to School helps ease morning traffic by shifting short trips to walking and bicycling.**
    - Approximately 10-14% of morning traffic is from parents driving their kids to school, so the choices parents make about the trip to school affect other drivers trying to get to work.
    - Nearly half of kids that live between one-quarter and one-half of a mile from school are currently driven to school, and the most common reason for driving is a lack of safety.
  - **Safe Routes to School helps address the childhood obesity epidemic.**
    - Health concerns related to obesity and overweight cost our country \$270 billion a year in increased medical costs and loss of economic productivity.
    - Safe Routes to School infrastructure gets children moving, creating an opportunity for daily physical activity and improved health through self-responsibility.
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**Making the Ask:** *Don't end the meeting or phone call without asking the Member's position on these issues.*

- We are concerned by reports that the House transportation bill outline would eliminate the Safe Routes to School program and eliminate dedicated funding for bicycling and walking. Senator Inhofe has also publicly stated he wants to eliminate funding for bicycling and walking.
  - Will you support continued, dedicated funding for the federal Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements and Recreational Trails programs?
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**Answering Tough Questions:** *See below for suggested answers to any tough questions that may come up.*

- **Shouldn't states or local towns pay for building paths to schools, instead of federal gas tax money?**

Answer: Over the years, federal transportation funding has focused on moving as many cars as fast as possible, making it dangerous for kids and families to walk and bicycle. Now we must retrofit many streets with basic infrastructure like sidewalks—communities don't have the resources to do this without the small amount of federal dollars available through Safe Routes to School. Safety is also squarely in the federal interest. With 30% of children's traffic deaths occurring when kids are walking and bicycling and are struck by cars, federal funds are desperately needed to make our infrastructure safe.
- **We need to cut back on federal spending, and the highway trust fund is broke. We can't afford this.**

Answer: For less than 1% percent of the federal transportation funding, Safe Routes to School is helping improve safety around more than 10,000 schools. Approximately 30% of children's traffic deaths occur when children are walking and bicycling and are struck by cars. Low-cost improvements, like sidewalks, can reduce by half the risk that a child will be struck by a car. In addition, making a one-time, low-cost investment like adding a sidewalk can reduce long-term school busing costs, ease financial burdens on schools struggling to manage rising gas prices, and reduce congestion and road wear and tear.
- **Safe Routes to School seems to be duplicative of other biking/walking programs, and is unnecessary.**

Answer: The impact of choices parents make about the trip to school has ramifications in many areas—children's safety, traffic congestion, physical activity levels, and school busing costs. School transportation has long been overlooked in transportation planning—and the result is that even for kids who live within a half-mile of school – 50% are driven by their parents because of safety concerns. The Safe Routes to School program has helped bring key stakeholders—local government, schools and parents—together and engaged them in transportation planning, prioritizing limited dollars to improve safety for children.
- **The House transportation bill gives states flexibility to choose to fund biking/walking, which I support.**

Answer: All three federal bicycling/walking programs are in high demand; local communities want safe bicycling and walking options. But, experience shows that most state DOTs won't fund these projects as they view them as outside of their responsibility, even though they give people cost-effective and congestion-reducing transportation options. Bicyclists and pedestrians represent 14% of traffic fatalities; we can't afford not to invest in these modes of transportation. Eligibility is not enough; we need dedicated federal funding from Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements & Recreational Trails.