

North Carolina

Writing the Next Chapter of Its Transportation Legacy





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The Safe Routes to School National Partnership is a nonprofit organization that improves the quality of life for kids and communities by promoting active, healthy lifestyles and safe infrastructure that supports bicycling and walking. We advance policy change; catalyze support for safe, active and healthy communities with a network of more than 700 partner organizations; and we share our deep expertise at national, state and local levels with those who are helping propel our mission forward. Founded in 2005, the Safe Routes to School National Partnership's mission is to advance safe walking and bicycling to and from schools, and in daily life, to improve the health and well-being of America's children and to foster the creation of livable, sustainable communities.

For more information visit www.saferoutespartnership.org.

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Introduction

In the early-to mid-1900s, North Carolina was once deemed the “Good Roads State” due to its state-of-the-practice transportation investments aimed at linking disconnected reaches of the state and fostering a sense of community.¹ In more modern times, the adoption of North Carolina’s Complete Streets policy in 2009 was championed as a new era for the Department of Transportation (NCDOT) as the agency promised to embark on more focused consideration of the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists in all of its investments.²

However, in 2013, North Carolina shifted gears. With the passage of *Strategic Transportation Investments* law (House Bill 817), North Carolina made a statement that it considers motorized transportation to be its primary transportation priority. This law prevents any state dollars from funding projects that are solely to improve conditions for bicycling and walking.

In September 2014, Governor Pat McCrory unveiled a new vision for transportation in North Carolina, *Vision25*, which offered a glimmer of hope for improved conditions for walking and bicycling. It states that “transportation infrastructure can’t be improved with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach” and that North Carolina must “expand bicycle and pedestrian routes” because it is part of “what people look for when making the decision where to move or where to relocate a business.”³

Unfortunately, the state has a long way to go to achieve Governor McCrory’s vision. Pedestrians and bicyclists are dying at a rate of one person every 46 hours in North Carolina,⁴ and the state sits on a stockpile of more than \$14.9 million in unspent Safe Routes to School funding meant to make it safe for children to walk and bicycle to and from school.

As of September 2014, NCDOT had obligated only 52 percent of its federal Safe Routes to School funds (\$15.9 million of \$30.7 million), the third worst rate among all southern states. Only Louisiana (47 percent) and Tennessee



(51 percent) rank worse than North Carolina while Alabama, Florida and Georgia have obligated more than 90 percent of their allocation. Neighboring Virginia is dramatically outpacing North Carolina with 87 percent of its funds obligated.⁵

We have work ahead of us in North Carolina to once again live up to the “Good Roads State” moniker and ensure that everyone in the state—whether driving, taking transit, walking or bicycling—can safely use our transportation systems and create healthy, prosperous communities.

Why Safe Places to Walk and Bicycle Matter in North Carolina

North Carolina’s Board of Transportation adopted *WalkBikeNC*, the North Carolina Department of Transportation’s (NCDOT) Statewide Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan, in December 2013. The plan states “there has never been a better time than the present to build on prior achievements and define the future for walking and bicycling.”⁶

Now is the time to act. North Carolina is the seventh most populous state, but is ranked 42nd and 41st in walking and bicycling commute rates, respectively.⁷

North Carolina’s demographics are changing and the trends indicate those changes will require the state to become more supportive of walking and bicycling in order to remain



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competitive. By 2040, 75 percent of North Carolinians are projected to live in urban areas.⁸ Urbanites have always been the most inclined towards walking and bicycling. Similarly, younger generations have reduced car usage in favor of a mix of walking, bicycling and public transportation. At a time when the state should be preparing for more walking and bicycling, the state has created barriers to that need.

Even more concerning and immediate is the state's poor record on safety, resulting in needless deaths of people walking and bicycling. Despite ranking in the bottom 20 percent of states for bicycling and walking, North Carolina ranks in the top 20 percent for pedestrian and bicyclist fatality rates. Inadequate infrastructure for walking and bicycling was the most commonly cited safety issue at the 2011 Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Summits hosted across the state. Yet we know what works: a study of Safe Routes to School infrastructure improvements found they reduced pedestrian injury by 44 percent.⁹

In addition to addressing concerns over safety and demographics, North Carolina needs to invest in viable infrastructure for active transportation to help reverse rising obesity rates. North Carolina has the 25th highest rate of obesity in the country, with 29 percent of adults obese. More concerning is that North Carolina has the 18th highest rate of childhood obesity in the nation, with 16 percent of young people ages 10 to 17 obese.¹⁰ North Carolina has cause to be worried about the health of its population—particularly its young people.

The obesity rates among children are alarming for the future of the state's health care system and health care spending. However, these statistics also impact our nation's military readiness, a major economic driver for North Carolina, as the state boasts the fourth-largest active duty military population in the United States.¹¹ Mission: Readiness, a nonpartisan national security organization made up of retired admirals and generals calling for smarter investments in America's children, notes that 1 in 4 young adults are unable to serve in the military due to excess weight.¹² In North Carolina, 26 percent of high school students obese or overweight.



“Creating active transportation options impacts national security,” Mission: Readiness said in its report, *Walking, Biking and National Security*. They recommended “securing increased funding for infrastructure improvements to the routes children use to walk and bike to school...and programs that promote safety and increased physical activity.”

Every child should have the opportunity to achieve the 60 minutes of recommended daily physical activity, and a proven strategy for achieving that goal is to incorporate physical activity into normal routines, such as walking or bicycling to and from school. A recent study found that comprehensive, sustained Safe Routes to School programs can increase walking and bicycling rates by 43 percent.¹³



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How are North Carolina Communities Improving Conditions for Walking and Bicycling?

Despite the slow spending of bicycle and pedestrian funding, NCDOT and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services have partnered to promote safety and increase physical activity. Together they have launched a new program, called Active Routes to School (ARTS), organized to help North Carolina utilize a portion of its unspent Safe Routes to School funding on non-infrastructure efforts, such as walking school buses, bicycle education and more. The agencies placed a coordinator in each of the state's 10 health regions to provide one-on-one coordination with school programs aimed at educating and encouraging walking and bicycling activities.

The desire among North Carolina communities to have more robust walking and bicycling networks was evident as soon as ARTS coordinators were deployed. The ARTS program has seen successes in 2014, many of them demonstrating how Safe Routes to School initiatives contribute to overall efforts to expand bicycling and walking. However, a shortcoming of the three-year ARTS program is that it is aimed only at educating and encouraging students about walking and bicycling to school. It will not fund safety improvements for walking and bicycling, such as sidewalks, crosswalks and bike paths.

Laurinburg

Let's take a stroll down to Laurinburg, a city of 15,500 in North Carolina's Sandhills Region. Laurinburg's Covington Street Elementary is one of North Carolina's shining new success stories when it comes to promoting active living among its student body.

The school, which is located in a city with an African-American population of more than 43 percent, has grown a once-a-year walk to school day into a weekly event through the assistance of the ARTS program. The "Running Redbirds" program has buses and parents drop off students at a local church 0.6 miles from the campus and the kids walk to school from there. The Running Redbirds are tracking their total mileage walked this year with a goal to walk the

equivalent mileage of Laurinburg to California. They are tying the mileage chart to the school's history curriculum with special lessons about the places along their route.

Durham

A hundred miles to the north of Laurinburg, the city of Durham, population 245,475, has transformed its once-gritty image to become one of the most recognized, livable cities in the South. Much of this transformation can be attributed to a dedicated emphasis on increasing options for bicycling and walking, which has contributed to a 100 percent increase in bicycle commuting from 2007 to 2012.

Durham has five elementary schools actively engaged in Safe Routes to School programs and has adopted Complete Streets policies and guidelines. Its Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee developed a travel survey for local schools, provided input to more than 250 development site plans, and has contributed to more than 30 miles of new bicycle lanes across the city.¹⁴

Brevard

In Western North Carolina, the city of Brevard (population 7,600) has also transformed its community through investments in bicycling and walking and is seeing direct benefits through increased tourism and economic development. Brevard was one of the first recipients of North Carolina's Safe Routes to School funding initiatives and used the program to construct the Gallimore Road multi-use path in 2008. The path has led to an increase in bicycling and walking to school as more than 60 percent of Brevard Elementary students now arrive via active modes.

Since the investment, the Brevard City Council has stepped up with an annual funding allocation to continue to promote walking and bicycling to school. The city allocated \$15,000 in 2015, and four schools provide encouragement in the form of a weekly walking school bus, bicycle rodeos, a springtime Safe Routes to School outdoor festival and a poster contest. The nearby mountain bike trails in the Pisgah National Forest and DuPont State Forest have made the community a hub of mountain biking in the southeast and generated new industries for mountain biking, in addition to spurring interest in converting an old rail line to a multi-use trail.



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Elsewhere around the state

Beyond these cities and small towns, more than 20 communities across the state have established their own pedestrian, bicycling, Complete Streets and/or Safe Routes to School committees. Many of the state's Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) have organized their own active transportation or Complete Streets committees. And more than a dozen cities, towns and MPOs have taken NCDOT's lead and adopted their own Complete Streets policies.



Actions Speak Louder Than Words

While towns and cities have worked hard to improve walking and bicycling, the state has allowed almost \$90 million worth of funding for walking and bicycling investments to go unspent. Over the past decade NCDOT failed to spend much of the funding it was allocated through federal transportation laws for walking and bicycling, which has cost the state more than 2,600 jobs.¹⁵

Specifically, from 2005 to 2012, the federal Safe Routes to School program provided North Carolina with \$30.7 million in funding to “enable and encourage children, including those with disabilities, to walk and bicycle to school, to make walking and bicycling to school safe and more appealing; and to facilitate the planning, development and implementation of projects that will improve safety, and reduce traffic.”¹⁶ Although no additional funding has been allocated specifically to Safe Routes to School since 2012

(when the program was merged into the new Transportation Alternatives Program), North Carolina is still sitting on 48 percent—or \$14.9 million—of its federally-allocated Safe Routes to School funding that accumulated over the seven-year program.¹⁷ In addition, North Carolina allowed more than \$74 million in Transportation Enhancements funding to go unspent, and those funds were ultimately reclaimed by the federal government.¹⁸

Letting North Carolina's share of funds from federal programs for bicycling and walking go unused is a sad trend in the state. In June 2011, the *Durham Herald-Sun* chronicled how NCDOT was allowing \$66.3 million to revert back to the federal government and for those returned funds “opted to target monies typically used at the local level to fund things like sidewalks, greenways and intersection improvements.” NCDOT staff responded “we have more than enough money in the budget to cover” these projects and “this is truly excess” funding.¹⁹

The irony is that we already know of countless projects that were identified through bicycle and pedestrian planning grants that NCDOT awarded in 2011 to nearly 120 communities.²⁰ Those plans generated recommended improvements along hundreds of miles of streets across the state. Today, more than 155 communities are seeking to identify funding to make improvements outlined in their state-funded bicycle and pedestrian plans while funds for projects just like these were returned to the federal government or sit unspent.

School-aged children have been waiting a decade for NCDOT to create safer conditions around their schools but will have to wait for many more years. As North Carolina still has \$14.9 million of unallocated Safe Routes to School funds, the state is executing a four-year plan to expend those funds. While other states had expended the majority of their funds by 2012, North Carolina's target is to expend its Safe Routes to School funds by 2018.

Communities have become discouraged over the state's slow handling of the Safe Routes to School program. Charlotte will no longer consider Safe Routes to School funding for infrastructure projects due to NCDOT's low project cost caps and project oversight requirements that have resulted in short sidewalk projects taking five years to construct.



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In early 2014, NCDOT sent the state's Safe Routes to School Coordinator to each of NCDOT's 14 Division offices to identify candidate projects to help spend down the remaining funds prior to the new Strategic Transportation Investments law taking effect. Many communities had worked for years to develop relationships with schools, principals and parents to develop an understanding of what projects should be the highest priority. Schools that had been working on action plans and project lists over the years were not informed or included in these meetings, leading to concerns that their projects will not be prioritized for funding.

Impacts of the Strategic Transportation Investments Law

House Bill 817,²¹ also known as the Strategic Transportation Investments Law, was signed by Governor McCrory in June 2013. It was precipitated, in part, by a desire to streamline projects to better spend NCDOT funds in an era of shrinking revenue streams. It was also created to advance the state's job creation programs, with highway investments seen as a catalyst for job growth. It created a new method for NCDOT to identify and fund the most-needed transportation projects. While the full ramifications of the Strategic Transportation Investments Law are still unclear and changes to the process are expected during the 2015 Long Session of the General Assembly, one major impact is clear: pedestrians and bicyclists are not given equal consideration when it comes to how North Carolina prioritizes transportation investments. The law took funding that NCDOT used to support walking and bicycling projects and redirected responsibility for this to "Powell Bill" funds, a program that contributes a portion of

the state's gas tax revenues to more than 500 municipalities to supplement maintenance costs.²²

Before this change, NCDOT used the funding (an average of approximately \$1.5 million per year) to supplement the non-federal share of bicycling and walking projects to help communities match their local funding. For example, a \$500,000 project using federal funds to build sidewalks between Main Street and a nearby neighborhood could require \$100,000 be paid with non-federal funding, and NCDOT would contribute a portion of the required \$100,000 match.

Cities and towns were thrilled to have NCDOT as a partner on the project and appreciated the state's help in alleviating the financial burden placed upon the municipality. Further, most of the walking and bicycling investments funded through this program were along NCDOT-managed roadways, so it made sense for NCDOT to be a funding partner. One of the last projects funded prior to the new law going into effect added bikeable shoulders along a stretch of US Highway 74 in Jackson County, North Carolina—a route identified for upgrades through one of NCDOT's regional bicycle plans.

Under the new law, the \$1.5 million is now divided among more than 500 municipalities. The average allocation of \$3,000 per city or town is roughly the equivalent of building one sidewalk curb ramp on one corner of one intersection. Raleigh officials called the move "an empty promise," noting that "most cities use up Powell Bill money to take care of basic resurfacing needs, so it's kind of backhanded."²³

While \$1.5 million may seem insignificant within a transportation budget that exceeded \$4.4 billion in 2013-2014,²⁴ it allowed NCDOT to leverage at least \$8 million per year in federal funding by partnering with municipalities on bicycling and walking projects. Based on figures from NCDOT's national affiliate, the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO), this created almost 140 jobs annually.²⁵ The effect is a major decrease in availability of resources to build bicycle and pedestrian improvements around the state.



Walking, Bicycling and Equity

North Carolina’s Complete Streets policy has been highlighted as a model by national organizations. The policy states that NCDOT is committed to ensuring that the “safety needs of motorists, transit users, bicyclists, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities are safely accommodated.”

We applaud North Carolina for creating a strong policy, but actual infrastructure investments to make those words a reality are lagging. WalkBikeNC—the statewide pedestrian and bicycle plan adopted by NCDOT December 2013—states that a survey of 16,000 North Carolina residents revealed the “most commonly reported safety issue for walking and bicycling was inadequate infrastructure.”²⁶

Through the Strategic Transportation Investments law most of the responsibility for improving conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists has been passed onto municipalities, even as more than 62 percent of pedestrian fatalities and more than 72 percent of bicyclist fatalities occur on NCDOT-managed streets and highways.²⁷

More disconcerting is the state’s safety statistics for pedestrians and bicyclists in minority and low-income communities, in which minorities are significantly more at risk of death. While approximately 22 percent of North Carolina’s population is African-American, more than 40 percent of the state’s pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities are African-Americans.²⁸

Statistics within some North Carolina cities are even more alarming. In Wilmington—a community that is 19.9 percent African-American—black children age 15 and younger comprise nearly 72 percent of the city’s 114 child pedestrian crashes.²⁹

In suburban Cary, which has the seventh-highest population among North Carolina cities, African-Americans represent 8 percent of the city’s population but account for nearly 16 percent of bicycling crash victims and 15 percent of pedestrian crash victims.³⁰

These troubling statistics are not just confined to North Carolina’s urban areas. A study conducted for southern Franklin County and large undeveloped areas in unincorporated northeast Wake County revealed that



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African-Americans represent 41 percent of pedestrian crash victims despite making up only 20 percent of this rural area's population.³¹

NCDOT has begun addressing some of these issues with its *Watch for Me NC* campaign which aims to “reduce pedestrian and bicycle injuries and deaths through a comprehensive, targeted approach of public education and police enforcement.”³² However, without infrastructure improvements, education can only do so much to reverse these alarming statistics.

North Carolina should take a hard look at its troubles with equity in transportation. It is a serious problem when minority children have twice the rate of pedestrian fatalities as their share of the population. Unfortunately, North Carolina's 2009 Complete Streets policy and related guidelines have yet to translate into safe and accessible pedestrian and bicycling facilities across the state for people of all races and ethnicities.

Does *Vision 25* Offer Hope?

In September, Governor McCrory released a 25-year transportation vision for North Carolina to address the state's growing transportation demand and associated funding challenges. The report acknowledges the lack of certainty in federal funding and the decreasing reliability of the state's gas tax, stating that North Carolina “must find new ways to strategically invest in our transportation network to meet growing demands.”³³

The vision is explicit in its support for expanding the bicycle and pedestrian network across the state through implementation of recommendations contained in the statewide pedestrian and bicycle plan *WalkBikeNC*. It also supports continued implementation of NCDOT's Complete Streets policy and creation of statewide and regionally significant bicycle and pedestrian systems.³⁴ But, to actually achieve this reality, *Vision 25* would require the state to make a commitment to actually fund active transportation investments.

So far, *Vision25* appears geared toward funding major highway investments through the issuance of more than \$1 billion in bonds as a way to “kick-start” projects in rural areas.³⁵ There is no project list or breakdown of potential funding allocation by mode or region.

The Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), based in Chapel Hill, offered an opinion on the Governor's vision in a column in the *Raleigh News & Observer*. Kym Hunter of SELC wrote that they agree that “bicycle and pedestrian options are essential to turn [North Carolina's] major metropolitan areas into vibrant communities and attract businesses... But it's not enough just to say so... If non-highway options are a priority, let's fund them.”³⁶





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Conclusion

The NCDOT and the General Assembly are responsible for determining how transportation funds are allocated in North Carolina. Given the alarming and inequitable safety statistics in North Carolina, combined with the demonstrated demand for bicycling and walking infrastructure throughout the state, North Carolina officials must consider how to invest in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure improvements at a scale where the investments can yield measurable benefits.

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership specifically recommends:

- North Carolina should evaluate the impact of the restriction of \$1.5 million from a bicycle and pedestrian investment fund and moving that responsibility to Powell Bill funds.
- North Carolina should expedite the spending of the remaining Safe Routes to School program funds, including on infrastructure improvements. The state has dragged its feet for almost a decade to use its Safe Routes to School funds, putting the funds at risk in times of fiscal austerity. Four more years is too long for our children to wait for safe infrastructure for walking and bicycling.
- North Carolina should dedicate a percentage of all future federal Transportation Alternatives Program funds specifically for Safe Routes to School projects to help ensure a continued focus on improving safety for children.
- Finally, North Carolina must take a hard look at its policies and standards of operation to identify solutions to the gross disparities that exist today in safety for minorities. It is inexcusable that an African-American child is twice as likely to be killed by a car as a white child. The state could choose to prioritize Safe Routes to School or Transportation Alternatives Program grants to lower-income communities or invest more state safety dollars into making improvements in communities where these disparities exist.

Following these recommendations would ensure that actual spending on safe walking and bicycling networks would align with existing policies. By re-examining its funding priorities, the state could then live up to its celebrated Complete Streets policy and NCDOT's mission to connect "people and places safely and efficiently, with accountability and environmental sensitivity to enhance the economy, health and well-being of North Carolina."³⁷



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End Notes

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