SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL: A Primer for Regional Governments

Introduction to Safe Routes to School

From 1969 to 2009, the overall number of children who walked or bicycled to school decreased from 48 percent to 13 percent. This decrease in active transportation can contribute to significant increases in traffic congestion as well as reductions in health and air quality. Safe Routes to School, a national and international movement to improve health, reduce traffic congestion and address air quality by getting more students walking and bicycling to school and in daily life, has been gaining momentum at the local, regional, state and national levels. This momentum accelerated in 2005 with the passage of the federal transportation act SAFETEA-LU (Safe Accountable Flexible Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users), which dedicated $1.1 billion to Safe Routes to School.

In 2012, the passage of a new federal transportation law, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21), significantly decreased dedicated funds for Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements and Recreational Trails, all referred to as Transportation Alternatives (TA) under the new law. Per MAP-21, state departments of transportation now allocate 50 percent of TA funds to MPOs for distribution in a competitive grant process. As of Fall 2012, MPOs around the country are considering the impact of this new funding source and how to manage Safe Routes to School projects and programs (which roughly fall into a new “Safe Routes for Non-Drivers” category) through the new TA criteria. As lines of communication open between MPOs, those who design and construct Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects, and those who manage noninfrastructure programs, there remains a critical opportunity to consider support for walking, bicycling and Safe Routes to School through policy and funding criteria.

Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School at the Regional Level

Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) throughout the country have adopted policies and practices that strengthen their ability to improve the livability of their region through strategies that support and encourage active transportation.

Innovation is happening. MPOs concerned with exploding populations, deteriorating roadways and bridges, air quality targets and congestion mitigation are looking for and enacting viable solutions through policy and funding decisions. The following strategies are excellent opportunities to incorporate bicycling
Strategy: Include Local Complete Streets Policy as a Project Selection Criteria

As municipalities compete for scarce dollars for regionally funded bicycle and pedestrian projects, there is an opportunity to encourage a local Complete Streets policies for potential applicants. Complete Streets policies ensure that every project recognizes the accommodation of all modes and users — including automobiles, transit, bicyclists, pedestrians, children, older adults and people with disabilities — when new projects are being built or renovations are being made. This bold approach ensures that municipalities are prioritizing bicyclists and pedestrians in all their projects and not just within the projects receive federal funding.

Case Study: San Francisco Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission

Thanks to testimony from parents, nonprofit organizations and health officials on the benefits of Safe Routes to School and active transportation to the safety and health of all San Francisco Bay Area residents, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) voted in Fall 2012 to approve $20 million dollars over the next four years for a regional Safe Routes to School program. This is the second cycle of funding for the MTC’s regional Safe Routes to School program, which allocates funding for both infrastructure- and noninfrastructure-related (outreach and education) Safe Routes to School projects and programs in the Bay Area’s nine counties. Their funding guidelines are here.

Additionally, with the support of practitioners in the region, the MTC required cities and towns that receive funding via the One Bay Area Grants (OBAG) – a new approach that combines federal transportation funding, California’s climate law and the Bay Area’s Sustainable Communities Strategy — to have first passed a Complete Streets policy resolution. The MTC created a model policy based on national best practices with nine minimum criteria for local jurisdictions to utilize. This innovative strategy ensures that jurisdictions seeking funding are aligning their internal policies first with walking, bicycling and transit priorities before receiving federal dollars for similarly themed projects.
Strategy: Create a Regional Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan

Consider creating a regional Safe Routes to School strategic plan that systematically identifies and supports local communities in establishing new programs and works to support and improve ongoing efforts. Include a diverse group of stakeholders in developing the plan, such as public health organizations, nonprofits, local jurisdictions, law enforcement officials and school districts. The final regional Safe Routes to School plan can be adopted into the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) at its next revision.

Case Study: San Diego Association of Governments and a Regional Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan

Beginning in 2010, with funding from the federal Communities Putting Prevention to Work initiative, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) worked to create a regional Safe Routes to School strategic plan that was eventually adopted by its board in 2012. Developed with input from a diverse group of stakeholders, the strategic plan outlines existing issues and opportunities as well as a regional strategy for moving forward that includes data collection, project collaboration and coordination, technical assistance, regional education, encouragement strategies and a defined implementation process. By creating a unified plan for implementing Safe Routes to School projects throughout the region, SANDAG has streamlined costs, engaged critical stakeholders, and addressed the regional need to support walking and bicycling to school and in daily life.

Strategy: Fund Full-Time Staff to Prioritize Bicycle and Pedestrian Projects

Bicycle and pedestrian projects have a large impact for a small amount of funding but are often underutilized at the regional level. MPOs can consider the creation of an active transportation department within the MPO with the expressed goal of improving conditions for bicycling and walking. If you are a hosted MPO, consider sharing this suggestion with your host agency to combine planning and implementation duties.

Case Study: Nashville MPO and Health in All Policies

The Nashville MPO committed to policy, funding and research that support the improvement of health outcomes through active transportation. Utilizing a portion of its federal funds, the MPO created an Active Transportation Program. This new program also included a new, influential and unique job position — director of healthy communities — that is focused on the built environment, active transportation and health.
### Strategy: Revise Scoring Criteria to Prioritize Bicycle and Pedestrian Projects

The scoring criteria for MPO projects are the key to all applications that follow, and jurisdictions will adapt their projects to score as high as possible. Revising the scoring criteria to assign higher points to applications that encourage projects near schools, promote physical activity, include bicycle and pedestrian elements, address high-crash corridors, improve access to transit and assess the health impact of projects ensures that awarded projects will encourage more walking and bicycling in the long-term.

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#### Case Study: Nashville MPO Scoring Criteria and Funding Set-Aside for Bicycling and Walking

Through the new Active Transportation Program, the Nashville MPO allocated an automatic 15 percent set-aside from their federal Surface Transportation Program funding for walking and bicycling projects, including crosswalks, greenways and sidewalks, educational or promotional activities, maps and law enforcement training initiatives. To improve the quality of projects submitted, they also revised their overall scoring criteria to encourage the inclusion of active transportation in roadway projects. Within the criteria, 60 out of 100 points are awarded based on the merits of a project’s walking and bicycling components, transit access plans and related potential health gains. Some examples of their project scoring criteria include:

**Project Criteria**

- Incorporates safety improvement strategies such as bicycle or pedestrian facility accommodations, signage or markings.
- Incorporates congestion management strategies such as providing additional non-motorized mode capacity.
- Includes pedestrian facilities, such as benches, bulb outs and pedestrian refuges.
- Includes bicycle facility improvements.
- Promotes physical activity.
- Addresses a high-crash location such as an intersection or corridor.
- Corrects Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) non-compliance.
- Is consistent with local and regional transportation priorities and plans.
- Is located near existing jobs, high-growth areas or planned growth areas.
- Improves multi-modal access to jobs and retail.
- Provides increased accessibility for low-income and minority communities.

Implementing these criteria has resulted in an increase from 2 percent to 70 percent of submitted projects addressing sidewalks, bike lanes and shared-use paths. More information on Nashville’s MPO scoring criteria can be found [here](#).
Additional Regional Strategies and Approaches:

*Improve Data Collection*

Data and the tools used to collect it are essential to driving regional decision-making. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that tools such as traffic crash, mode share and other pertinent data sets are utilized to ensure that walking and bicycling are fairly represented in the region. The regional household travel survey should include questions that inquire into specific travel patterns, including bicycling and walking to school. If funding is an issue, consider coordinating with neighboring regions to create a more robust and effective regional household travel survey.

*Share Best Practices in the Region to Encourage Innovation in Submitted Projects*

Utilize the expertise in the region by holding regular information sessions with municipal staff and supporters to share best practices in bicycle, pedestrian and Safe Routes to School projects. This will inform future projects, encourage peer learning between jurisdictions, support collaboration between transportation management agencies, and ultimately provide more robust, thoughtful bicycle and pedestrian projects in the long run.

*Integrate Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation into Long-Range Transportation Plans, Transportation Improvement Programs and other Regional Planning Documents*

As with all topics in planning, if the necessary language isn’t included in long- or short-range plans, desired outcomes are unlikely to come to fruition. In turn, ensure that walking and bicycling and Safe Routes to School are included in regional planning and that such transportation modes and programs are given a fair share of funding.

*Involve Bicycling, Walking and Safe Routes to School Practitioners*

MPOs should take advantage of bicycling and walking expertise during programming discussions, funding decisions and planning. MPOs can form or add to a bicycle and pedestrian advisory council to ensure the involvement of local supporters, public health officials, planners and other professionals with first-hand experience as bicyclists and pedestrians, including representatives from lower-income communities in the region. Before including bicycle and pedestrian projects or programs in the LRTP, make sure that the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) scoring criteria or TA project selection includes bicycling and walking expertise.

*Ensure Equity and Fair Share of Funding*

At a minimum, MPOs should provide fair and equitable funding for bicycling and walking projects and programs. Compare local mode share against crash data when allocating regional dollars to specific projects and programs. Additionally, the funding process can be an opportunity to prioritize walking and bicycling safety projects such as Safe Routes to School as effective avenues to better health and injury prevention. Ensure that your bicycle and pedestrian advisory council and scoring criteria address the needs of lower-income communities and ensure such communities receive a fair share of funding during project selection.
Conclusion

As regions around the country begin to take on the challenge of implementing MAP-21, allocating TA funding and becoming more familiar with Safe Routes to School as well as innovations in policies and funding that support walking and bicycling to school and in daily life continue to bubble to the surface. Safe Routes to School can help regions achieve their goals of reducing congestion and improving air quality and traffic safety. While the above list of strategies is innovative, it is not exhaustive. Adopting funding policies, involving local experts, adjusting scoring criteria and dedicating funding to regional walking and bicycling improvements are great ways to begin to build Safe Routes to School into the MPO planning process and creating healthier communities for all.

Resources

MAP-21 Guidance
(Federal Highway Administration)

Creating Healthy Regional Transportation Plans
(TransForm and the California Department of Public Health, 2012)

Transportation Planning Capacity Building
(U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration)

The Transportation Planning Process: Key Issues
(U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, 2007)

Guide to the San Francisco Bay Area’s Transportation Improvement Program, or TIP
(Metropolitan Transportation Commission, August 2010)

Example: Regional Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan
(San Diego Association of Governments)

Complete Streets Policy Elements
(Smart Growth America)

Promoting Active Transportation: An Opportunity for Public Health
(American Public Health Association and Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership works to advocate for 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.

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