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Healthy Communities



Safe Routes to School: Collaboration and Participation in Albany, Oregon

Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

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Safe Routes to School: Collaboration and Participation in Albany, Oregon

Nationwide, fewer than 15 percent of schoolchildren between the ages of 6 and 12 walk or ride their bikes to school, and more than half are driven to school. These proportions are the inverse of what they were forty years ago, when nearly half of all children walked or rode their bikes to school—among those living within one mile of school, it was nearly 90 percent—and fewer than 15 percent arrived in private vehicles.¹ As the rate of children arriving at school in private vehicles has increased, so too have obesity rates. In 2009, thirty states reported that at least 30 percent of children are obese or overweight.² Obesity and the serious health conditions that often accom-

pany it may make this generation the first to live unhealthier lives and die younger than its parents. Consequently, communities across the country are beginning to invest in programs through which they can address childhood obesity by incorporating physical activity into children's daily routines while also improving overall community health and safety. One such program is Safe Routes to School (SRTS).

Albany's Safe Routes to School Story

Albany, Oregon, is a city of 49,000 residents in the Willamette River Valley in West-Central Oregon, about seventy-five miles south of Portland. The city began its SRTS program in 2005, shortly after Wes Hare became Albany's city manager. Jim Lawrence and Bill Pintard, active members of the city's Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission, approached Hare about starting an SRTS program as a means of extending the commission's efforts to make Albany a more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly community. Also interested in an SRTS program was the Healthy Albany Partnership (HAP)—a coalition of city and county agencies, organizations, and businesses that strive to promote healthy living. Hare responded favorably.

The program, which was started through the city manager's office, is run by a committee that is chaired by Hare and includes city and school district staff and members of both the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission and HAP. The committee identifies infrastructure improvements that need to be made surrounding schools and finds ways to accomplish them. It also works to keep the program moving forward, raising SRTS-related issues with the city council and school board and organizing events such as the International Walk and Bike to School Day.

The city manager's office put together a grant application for the Linn County Health Department to submit to the federal SRTS program in that program's first round of funding in 2005; in Oregon the federal program is administered by the Oregon Department of

What Is Safe Routes to School?

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is a program that promotes the idea that improving safety and encouraging more children to walk or bike to school, thus incorporating physical activity into the daily routine and reducing traffic congestion and the resultant air pollution, enhances quality of life. The program is built around the five "E's": engineering, education, encouragement, enforcement, and evaluation.

The Federal Highway Administration funded pilot SRTS projects in 2000 in Marin County, California, and Arlington, Massachusetts. The program was then established in August 2005 through Section 1404 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act—A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which designated \$612 million in federal transportation funds to SRTS programs. As of 2008, all fifty states and the District of Columbia have SRTS programs and coordinators, and forty-three states have established SRTS funding on a local or regional level administered through their state departments of transportation.

While the federal SRTS program provides a good foundation, the funds it makes available through SAFETEA-LU reach less than 6 percent of elementary schools and can cover only a fraction of the infrastructure additions, changes, and repairs these schools require for children to be able to walk or bike to school safely.

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Strolling down the wide sidewalks in Albany's historic district. Albany is relatively flat—ideal for both walking and biking. Investing in the SRTS infrastructure, such as sidewalks, can benefit the entire community.



Transportation and the nonprofit Bicycle Transportation Alliance. Although the city did not receive the grant, the committee decided to go forward with the program. “We kept meeting,” said Marilyn Smith, Albany’s public information officer. “We focused on doing interim events like the walking school buses and the annual International Walk and Bike to School Day. We made some minor infrastructure changes that we could afford to make, and we continued using volunteers to do data collection.”

Although not receiving federal funding presented an early challenge, the SRTS committee also saw an early success. Soon after the committee formed, members began working to get parents and school district staff involved. The most active parent volunteers had children attending Oak Grove Elementary School in North Albany, the area of the city to the north of the Willamette River, in Benton County; these parents were becoming increasingly concerned about growing traffic volume from several new subdivisions in the

Healthy Albany Partnership and Albany Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission

The Healthy Albany Partnership (HAP) and the Albany Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission are both integral to promoting active living in Albany, and both have active membership on the Safe Routes to School committee. HAP was founded in 2005 as part of Healthy Active Oregon, a statewide initiative to make Oregon’s communities healthier; it represents city and county agencies, organizations, and businesses in Albany that are interested in promoting healthy eating and active living, and it works to promote healthy programs across the community by serving as a conduit for these activities and taking an active role in community outreach.

The Albany Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission was founded in 1990. The commission serves in an advisory capacity to the city council, making recommendations for bicycle and pedestrian improvements, and examining new

plans and proposed changes to ensure that they will accommodate bicycles and pedestrians. Currently, the commission is working to make Albany a bicycle-friendly city, as designated by the League of American Bicyclists. There are 108 communities that have been designated as bicycle friendly across the country, and nearby Portland—one of three cities to earn a platinum rating—is both a regional and national leader in promoting bicycle infrastructure and ridership. The commission also actively encourages residents to make use of the existing bicycle infrastructure. “In this community, there is an interlocking between the [SRTS] committee and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Commission because the members are somewhat the same, and we are out there promoting the same things,” said Bill Pintard, chairman of the commission and a member of the SRTS committee.

area. As their concerns meshed well with the goals of the SRTS committee, the parents sought the committee's support for a multiuse path on Gibson Hill Road, a major route to the school. Committee members knew that such an improvement needed to be made part of the city's capital improvements plan (CIP) and that this required the support of the city council. They suggested that the parents bring their concerns to the city council. More than forty elementary school students and a dozen or so parents attended a council meeting to express their support for creating safe

The success of the SRTS program in Albany has largely been a result of the high level of collaboration between the city manager's office and the school district.

routes for children to walk or bike to school, and the council approved the measure, integrating the SRTS-related infrastructure improvements into the city's CIP.

The success of the SRTS program in Albany has largely been a result of the high level of collaboration between the city manager's office and the school district. The program has grown since its inception,

having gained a number of dedicated volunteers and additional support from both the city and the Greater Albany Public School District. By the beginning of the 2009–2010 school year, the program was active in four elementary schools and one middle school, and two principals had joined the SRTS committee.

The program also received a \$37,500 grant from the federal SRTS program in June 2009, administered by the school district, for a half-time SRTS coordinator for the 2009–2010 school year. The coordinator's roles are to connect with and educate parents and the broader community, to recruit volunteers, to oversee bicycle and pedestrian safety in the schools, and to ensure that children have access to safe routes to their schools. Through the work of the coordinator, the committee hopes to increase the percentage of children walking to school from 20 percent during the 2008–2009 school year to 30 percent during the 2009–2010 school year, and to increase the percentage of children biking to school from 5 percent to 10 percent.

The committee has also applied for a \$500,000 infrastructure grant from the National Center for Safe Routes to School. The infrastructure grant—the first infrastructure funding the committee has applied for since being turned down in 2005—would be used to complete the last 300 yards of sidewalk on Gibson Hill Road, which serves as a route to Oak Grove Elementary School, North Albany Elementary School, and North Albany Middle School.



Children enjoying a playground at Timber Linn Memorial Park. Albany has a good infrastructure of parks and playgrounds that promote physical activity.

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Committee members see a number of benefits of the SRTS program. First, around Oak Elementary School in South Albany, where walking school bus routes have been established by volunteers who meet the children and walk them to school, the district was able to eliminate three bus routes for an annual savings of \$78,000. Second, walking and biking to school provides schoolchildren with an opportunity

“The hope is that our students will become healthier . . . with habits that will last a lifetime. We think kids who are healthier learn better.”

for routine physical activity, especially at a time when schools are cutting back on physical education classes in response to budget cuts. “Everyone knows that we have an issue with childhood obesity,” noted Maria Delapoe, superintendent of the Greater Albany Public School District. In Oregon, 24.3 percent of children are overweight or obese.³ While that is the third lowest rate in the country, it still indicates that nearly one in four children is overweight or obese and at risk for the serious health problems that accompany obesity. “A lot of it is due to inactivity combined with eating habits, but primarily inactivity,” Delapoe continued. “The hope is that our students will become healthier . . . with habits that will last a lifetime. We think kids who are healthier learn better.”

Third, encouraging more children to walk or bike to school—and making it safe for them to do so—takes cars off the road. A July 2008 report by the National Safe Routes to School Task Force found that up to 21 percent of morning traffic is generated by parents driving children to school.⁴ “If they can ride [their bikes] to school, then their parents don’t have to drive them,” said Jim Lawrence, an active SRTS committee member and walking school bus leader. “It takes cars off the road; it reduces pollution. It is such a winner in so many ways; it is hard to enumerate them.”

Like any program, Albany’s SRTS program has faced its fair share of challenges, including difficulty recruiting parent volunteers and finding the funding necessary for infrastructure improvements. Nevertheless, Albany’s experience provides excellent lessons on how to overcome challenges and create effective programs that keep children healthy and active while

also benefitting the community as a whole. Its SRTS program can be summarized in terms of five best practices that offer important lessons for other communities trying to begin or build SRTS programs. The city’s SRTS committee persevered through early challenges to build a successful and growing program by

- Fostering **collaboration** among the city, school district, and community groups
- Building a base of dedicated staff and volunteers who have shown **commitment** to the program
- Finding **practical solutions** to challenges that have arisen
- Building **public engagement** by getting parents and community volunteers involved in the program
- Incorporating the program into **education**, including bicycle and pedestrian safety classes at the elementary schools.

These best practices will be revisited at the end of this case study.

Collaboration and Participation

In Albany, the city, the school district, and community groups, including the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission and the Healthy Albany Partnership (HAP), have worked together closely to define and pursue their goals and strategies for getting more children to walk or bike to school. “Collaboration facilitates the process because [the committee members] have key information for the project,” said Danette DeSaulnier, the city’s benefits coordinator and the HAP representative on the SRTS committee. “Things can move forward a lot faster. . . . There is a quicker response [to problems] and a lot more accurate information” about the issues at hand.

However, it took time to develop this level of cooperation. While the city has been actively involved since the SRTS program’s beginning in 2005, it took time for the school district to come around: a former administrator did not see the benefit of the program and was unwilling to invest staff time and school district resources. But in 2007 the SRTS committee invited Wayne Goates, the school district’s student services coordinator, to become a member, and he became actively involved. Having a school district representative on the committee helped to facilitate communication between the city and the school district and made the schools more amenable to the program. Committee members cite Goates’s involvement as a



Photo Courtesy of the Greater Albany Public School District

Timber Ridge School, the first new school built in Albany in thirty years. The SRTS committee worked to ensure that the school would be built in walking distance of existing residential neighborhoods.

turning point, and soon their efforts shifted from large infrastructure improvements around schools in North Albany to smaller, incremental improvements and changes around schools in South Albany—the area to the south of Pacific Boulevard and the downtown—that could be accomplished very quickly. This shift in focus, along with Goates’s involvement, also engaged more schools and paved the way for the committee’s involvement in the siting of Timber Ridge School (see sidebar on page 7). In 2008, Maria Delapoer, the new district superintendent, joined the committee, as did the principals of Oak Elementary School and Clover Ridge/Timber Ridge Schools.

Over the last three years, according to Hare’s estimation, the city has spent about \$200,000 in in-kind support, including staff time, materials, and smaller infrastructure improvements, such as sidewalks and crosswalks installed around schools. Over the 2008–2009 school year, the school district contributed about \$3,000 to the program in office space, staff time, materials, and use of office equipment. This level of collaboration has led to close working relationships among committee members, who have noted how well they work together and how everyone follows through on what he or she has individually agreed to do. Their high level of involvement has facilitated changes, including the needed infrastructure improvements, and has helped to ensure that the program keeps moving forward and continues to expand. “I love sitting on

the committee and hearing about this change that has come about through this committee,” DeSaulnier said. “It’s about getting the right group together.”

City Manager Hare and Superintendent Delapoer meet once each month to review issues, including the SRTS program, nutrition, and physical fitness in the schools; the possible elimination of school bus routes; and other issues that affect both the city and

Support of local elected leaders has been critical to program successes, such as the inclusion of SRTS-related infrastructure changes into the CIP.

the school district. The school board and city council meet once or twice each year as well, and for the past several years, the SRTS program has been an agenda item at these meetings.

The SRTS committee has also worked with the city council and school board on issues related to the SRTS program. Hare emphasized that the support of local elected leaders has been critical to program successes, such as the inclusion of SRTS-related infrastructure changes into the CIP. “City managers and superintendents propose, but our elected officials dispose,” he noted.

Successes

Albany has had a number of successes with its SRTS program in its first four years—successes that committee members largely attribute to having the right group of committed people at the table. For one thing, the committee has seen significant progress in securing the small infrastructure improvements that have made it safer for children to walk or bike to school. “A lot of it is about reengineering our community,” DeSaulnier observed. “And a lot of that is on an infrastructure level as much as it is on an education level.” As a result, the committee has focused on those infrastructure improvements, laying the (literal) groundwork necessary for the program to grow.

The infrastructure improvements, which have largely been incorporated into the city’s CIP, include new school zone signs that have helped to reduce the speed limit in school zones; new crosswalks and pedestrian signs (including flashing, solar-powered lights in North Albany and near South Albany High School), which alert drivers to the presence of pedestrians in the crosswalk; and several pedestrian islands or “refuges” that have been installed to facilitate the crossing of busy roads, including one near Oak Grove Elementary School. These pedestrian islands provide a safer way for children to cross the street because they slow traffic speeds and require children to look only one way at a time.

Many of these improvements cost relatively little in light of the benefits they provide. Bicycle lane striping, which costs 50 cents per square foot per year, dedicates a portion of the road to bicycles alone, thereby making bicyclists more visible and enhancing their safety. Pedestrian crossings, like the aforementioned solar-powered one, cost about \$15,000, while pedestrian islands, depending on their size, cost between \$15,000 and \$25,000; both are relatively modest investments that make it safer for children to walk or bike to school and encourage a more active lifestyle for the whole community.

The city has made some larger infrastructure changes as well. The Federal Highway Administration promotes the use of roundabouts (see photo on page 8), which are comparable in cost to a traditional traffic signal. They slow and control traffic through three main design features: yield control of traffic entering the roundabout, channelized approaches that direct traffic into the one-way traffic flow, and a curved roadway that slows traffic to safer speeds. The installation of roundabouts has resulted in up to a 60 percent decrease in collisions, up to an 82 percent reduction in injuries from collisions, and a nearly 100 percent reduction in fatalities from traffic collisions.⁵ Accordingly, a roundabout was installed in North Albany, and its success in achieving nearly 100 percent compliance with traffic yielding to pedestrians has led to plans to install a second roundabout near Timber Ridge School.



Signs around Central Elementary School, near downtown Albany



A pedestrian “refuge” near Oak Grove Elementary School in North Albany





A new pedestrian crosswalk installed in South Albany near Oak Elementary School to make it safer for students to walk to school.

Another major SRTS success has been the establishment of walking school bus routes around several of Albany's elementary schools to encourage children living within a mile of school to walk. Around Oak Elementary School, there are several daily routes. During practice walks held on the last three days of the 2008–2009 school year, 44 of 72 students—61 percent—who live within walking distance participated. At the beginning of the 2009–2010 school year, the walking school buses were led by adult volunteers, who met the children at their drop-off points. The hope is that as the school year continues and the

routes become standard, parents will see safety in numbers and older children will be able to lead the walking school bus routes.

The Albany schools also participate in the annual International Walk and Bike to School Day. The first year they participated, over 200 students walked down Gibson Hill Road to Oak Grove Elementary School as part of a walking school bus, which originated at Fire Station 14 and was escorted by a fire engine. In the fall of 2009, 150 students at Oak Elementary School participated in four walking school bus routes led by City Manager Hare, Public Information Officer

Selecting a Site for Timber Ridge School

Timber Ridge, a new school for grades 3–8, is the SRTS committee's greatest success. The school was the first to be built in Albany in thirty-two years, during which time the city's population doubled. As the school district began considering a location for a new school, the committee advocated for it to be sited within walking and biking distance of the homes of children in its attendance area. "The temptation for districts is to try to put schools where there is affordable land, trying to keep costs down," said Wes Hare, Albany's city manager. "The pattern across the country is schools that are located far away from residential centers, where land is cheap, [but] where kids can't walk and bike."

From the outset, the SRTS committee began looking at how the location would affect the number of students who would be able to walk or bike to the new school and how the existence of safe routes for them to use could be ensured. According to Wayne Goates, the Greater Albany Public Schools student services coordinator, between 400 and 500 homes in the combined Clover Ridge/Timber Ridge attendance area are within walking distance of the school (defined as 1 mile for children in grades K–5 and 1.5 miles for students in grades 6–12). The committee hopes that changes and improvements over the next year, including the addition of a roundabout near the school, will expand the walkable area by another 500–600 homes, or approximately 120 students.

Jim Lawrence, a member of the Albany Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission and the SRTS committee, and a volunteer with the Bicycle Safety Education Program, demonstrating how to ride safely through a roundabout. The roundabout, which is near several schools in North Albany, has been a great success for the city. According to transportation systems analyst Ron Irish, observations of the traffic flow at the roundabout have revealed a 100 percent compliance rate of cars yielding to pedestrians.



Marilyn Smith, Mayor Sharon Konopa, and South Albany High School leadership students. Of the students living within walking distance, 77 percent participated, exceeding expectations.

The biggest success cited by committee members, however, came with the selection of a site for Timber Ridge School, a new school for grades 3–8 and the first new school to be built in Albany in more than

“A lot of it is about reengineering our community, . . . and a lot of that is on an infrastructure level as much as it is on an education level.”

thirty years (see sidebar on page 7). The committee played an active role in ensuring that the school would be built in a neighborhood where children would be able to walk or bike to school rather than having to be driven or bused.

Albany’s Safe Routes to School story offers a lesson in persistence. Despite the denial of funding through the federal SRTS program in 2005 and the lack of consistent parental involvement, the committee has stayed focused on moving forward with its agenda. In doing so, it has been able to make the infrastructure improvements and other changes described above, recruit more volunteers, secure funding for the program coordinator, and slowly build support for the

program. The program is now well positioned for future growth as SRTS gains momentum on a national scale and more funding becomes available.

Challenges and Barriers

Like any new initiative, Albany’s SRTS program has faced its fair share of challenges along with its successes. And like its successes, the challenges have yielded important lessons for communities seeking to create successful SRTS programs and develop creative solutions to help overcome obstacles through strong stakeholder collaboration. Albany’s SRTS committee members identified three key challenges that the program has faced: limited staff time, limited funds, and a lack of parental involvement. However, the committee has worked to actively address these challenges and has made significant progress.

Time

Albany’s SRTS program has relied on volunteers and donated staff time since its inception, something Delapoe identified as one of the biggest challenges. “I think the major barrier is having staff time, being able to focus on this,” she said. “Basically, it would come down to principals promoting it and getting parents involved to maintain it. The barrier has really been not having a coordinator to provide information and help schools set up the systems that they need.”

To address this concern, in the spring of 2009 the committee applied for a \$36,000 grant from the federal SRTS program for a half-time SRTS coordinator. It was awarded \$37,500 to cover the coordinator's position and related administrative costs. Currently, the SRTS coordinator is the only paid member of the committee. Committee members are enthusiastic about this new position and see it as critical to coordinating program activities and recruiting volunteers. Additionally, it will take some pressure off of city and school district staff, who feel pulled between their job responsibilities and their responsibility to the committee.

Money

Coming up with funds for infrastructure improvements around schools has also been a challenge since the start of the program. "We have been able to come up with little bits of money to do these improvements," said Ron Irish, the city's transportation systems analyst. "But if we wanted to go beyond that and do more, the city is going to have a hard time pitching in a lot of money. The school district doesn't have any, and Safe Routes in theory has some

funds, but they are virtually inaccessible" for smaller projects, such as patching sidewalks or installing bike racks at schools.

The committee has found creative ways to fund the projects necessary for the SRTS program to succeed. As has been noted, many of the pedestrian improvements have been folded into the city's larger CIP; while these improvements may be primarily intended to make it safer for children to walk or ride their bikes to school, they benefit the entire community. The SRTS program has also been integrated with existing curricula, including the Bicycle Safety Education Program and the pedestrian programs at several of the elementary schools, extending its resource pool.

The committee has also sought external sources of funding. In 2009, it applied for a \$500,000 grant from the federal SRTS program for one of its larger projects—a 300-yard extension of the sidewalk on Gibson Hill Road, which leads to both Oak Grove Elementary School and North Albany middle and elementary schools. In addition, the city and school district have worked to create a matching budget of staff time and supplies for such events as the International Walk and Bike to School Day.

Bicycle Safety Education Program and Pedestrian Safety

The Bicycle Safety Education Program, administered by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance within the schools, came to Albany in 2000. The program is aimed at fifth-graders, although it also includes fourth-graders in schools with combined classes. Initially, the city borrowed bikes and helmets from nearby Corvallis's Bicycle Safety Education Program, which had been selected in 1998 as one of three statewide pilot programs. However, class sizes in Corvallis are smaller, so there were not enough bikes to go around for classes in Albany.

When children were asked to bring in their own bikes, program volunteers found that many of those bikes were not safe to ride. "We can't rely on children bringing their own bikes because some children don't have bikes and [other bikes] are in such disrepair," said Jim Lawrence, a program volunteer. "That is what this program is about, teaching children how to move safely around their community using the existing infrastructure, which is the public street system."

Program officials decided that for the program to continue in Albany, it would need its own bicycle fleet. With funding from the Greenwell Family Foundation, the program was able to purchase thirty bikes, and an additional grant from the Seattle-based Weyerhaeuser Corporation enabled it to buy

helmets. Since then, the program has grown to serve eight of Albany's fifteen elementary schools. In 2007, it had over 500 participants.

The Bicycle Safety Education Program has been integrated into the SRTS program. "When Safe Routes came along, it was obvious to me that this bike safety [program] would be an integral part of that," Lawrence said. "It is always a problem to raise money and to get it integrated in because there is pressure at the school for time in the classroom."

The Bicycle Safety Education Program has also maintained a group of dedicated volunteers, whose commitment Lawrence attributes to a program that is very rewarding for volunteers. "Once you see the program in action and you can understand what the kids are learning, it is very infectious," he said. "To me, there is no greater reward than to see the light in a child's eyes that he has just received a magic carpet that will take him anywhere he wants to go under his own power and his own direction."

Schools also offer pedestrian safety for grades K-5. "The thing I like best about the Pedestrian Safety program we did last year is that you go on field trips and practice it in the real setting," said Tonja Everest, principal of Oak Elementary School.

Parental Involvement

Despite actively recruiting at Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings, the program has struggled to get parents involved. The committee has identified several reasons for this, including the relatively short time that children attend schools, parents' busy schedules, and parents' perceptions of safety.

Transitory Interest One of the difficulties that the committee has encountered with recruiting and retaining active parent volunteers is the length of time that children attend schools. Most of Albany's elementary schools are kindergarten through fifth grade, although there are also several primary schools that are kindergarten through second grade and elementary schools that are third through eighth grade. Committee members noted that parents who have been very involved in the program often lose interest when their children move to another grade level, and particularly when they move from elementary to middle school. Additionally, the program has lost several very active parent volunteers who moved away from Albany.

Many of the committee members and volunteers with the Bicycle Safety Education Program are not parents with children currently in the schools but instead are members of the community—including city and school district staff—with a strong interest in SRTS. Their efforts to recruit volunteers and committee members who are passionate about the issue, even if they do not have children participating in the program, have helped to maintain the momentum as parent volunteers have come and gone.

Conflicting Obligations Consistency among volunteers has been a challenge for the SRTS program. "Volunteers aren't always completely consistent. They are adults, they have complex lives, things come up, and they can't do it that day," observed Tonja Everest, principal of Oak Elementary School. When volunteers do not show up for their shifts, children in the walking school buses do not have a safe way to get to school. Parents then worry and stop letting their children walk, which can threaten the stability of the program. To address this particular challenge, the SRTS committee is exploring the possibility of training older children to lead the walking school buses. "My big thing with this is that to change a human behavior, you have to practice it; it is easier to change in children than in adults," Everest said. "So I want kids to connect with other kids, understand safe ways to get to

school, and sustain these routes even when an adult isn't available."

The SRTS program coordinator will play a role in recruiting parent volunteers for the program. Having more volunteers will help to ensure that someone is available to take over walking school bus routes when the regular volunteer is unable. Committee members also noted that in Portland, where the SRTS program actively recruits retirees to lead walking school buses, there has been more consistency among volunteers.

Perceptions of Safety Many committee members identified parents' perceptions of safety as a major challenge. On surveys administered at Oak Elementary School, many parents answered that they saw walking to school as a healthy behavior for children but then checked "no" when asked if their children would participate in the program. Wayne Goates, the school district's student services coordinator, described the

Stranger danger is perceived to be a far greater threat than it actually is.

problem: "Parents say they aren't going to let their small kids walk. . . . Cars around schools are some of the real safety concerns, but there is a perception [that it is not safe for children to walk]." He went on to note the committee's hope that using the SRTS model "where it is safe and your kids will [walk or ride their bikes] with other kids can change this perception."

In addition to traffic safety issues, many parents are concerned about "stranger danger": the potential threat that strangers may pose toward their children. A September 2009 *New York Times* article, written in the wake of the thirtieth anniversary of the abduction of Etan Patz in New York City and recent revelations about the abduction of Jaycee Dugard in California, explores this fear that parents have about letting their children walk to school. According to the article, stranger danger is perceived to be a far greater threat than it actually is. On average, 115 children are abducted each year, while 250,000 are injured or killed in traffic accidents⁶—the leading cause of death for children ages 3 to 14.⁷ As Hare noted, "One thing that a lot of people don't understand is that children are most at risk when they are in cars. There is some data that shows that kids are safest in New York City, and the reason is that they are not in cars."

The fears expressed by parents in Albany are the same as those expressed by parents nationally, and

they have been an obstacle for SRTS programs across the country. In a 2004 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, parents reported four main reasons for not letting their children walk or bike to school: distance (61.5 percent); traffic-related danger (30.4 percent); weather (18.6 percent); and crime/perceived danger (11.7 percent). In addition, 6 percent of parents listed school policies as a barrier preventing them from allowing their children to walk or bike to school. Parents whose children did not walk or bike to school were more likely to identify distance, traffic, crime, and school policies as barriers, whereas parents who did allow their children to walk to school were more likely to identify weather as an obstacle.⁸

Albany's SRTS committee has been actively working to address all these safety concerns. Members hope that having a coordinator who can assist with educational and informational programs and who can be a consistent presence at PTO meetings will help. At the beginning of each school year, the coordinator and committee members also attend back-to-school nights at the participating schools to talk about the benefits of the SRTS program. Additionally, the committee predicts that as more children start walking or biking to school, perceptions related to safety (or lack thereof) will change, encouraging even more children to follow suit. "The more you have that critical mass of people on bikes and walking, the safer it becomes," noted Bill Pintard, chair of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission. "It just becomes safer when you have

more people out there, not behind a windshield, because they are seeing things they wouldn't otherwise see. It creates a safer, friendlier community."

Plans for Future Program Growth

Albany's SRTS committee has a clear vision for the program's continued growth. The hope is to slowly expand to more schools while making the infrastructure improvements that make this expansion feasible; the ultimate goal is to increase the number of children biking or walking to school to about 40 percent of all schoolchildren. Increases have already been seen at several schools, including Oak Elementary, where multiple school bus routes were eliminated in the spring of 2009. "I see it expanding into all of our schools in the Greater Albany Public School District," said Tove Gilbert-Morgan, the new SRTS coordinator. "Ideally, amongst all of our schools we could get to the point where we could beat the rate in the 1960s. . . . It would be ideal to have a community of parents and kids using a form of transportation other than cars to get to and from schools." DeSaulnier echoed Gilbert-Morgan's remarks: "On a grand scale. . . look at Portland. That is a great pilot program. I would love to see walking school buses and lots of volunteers—elderly retired people walking kids to school for their exercise and for the kids' exercise. I walked and rode my bike to school, and I see that being normal. That is not the norm now."

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Albany's story can be summarized in terms of five best practices, which offer important lessons for building strong programs and overcoming obstacles:

- **Collaboration:** The program has relied on a high degree of collaboration among the city, the school district, Linn and Benton counties, the Healthy Albany Partnership (HAP), and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission. Their cooperative efforts have facilitated the SRTS committee's actions by pooling city and school district resources, as well as the resources of the partnership and the advisory commission.
- **Commitment:** The SRTS committee is made up of dedicated people who have a strong interest in and commitment to the issue. Getting the right group together, as well as achieving the high degree of collaboration, has helped to ensure the program's steady progress.
- **Practical solutions:** The committee has systematically addressed challenges with practical solutions, from incorporating SRTS projects into the city's capital improvements plan to coming up with creative ways to encourage children and parents to participate in the SRTS program.
- **Public engagement:** The committee works hard to disseminate information, publicize events such as International Walk and Bike to School Day, and attend open houses and Parent-Teacher Organization meetings to discuss the SRTS program. These efforts help members boost parental support and recruit volunteers for the program.
- **Education:** SRTS has been integrated into existing curricula and programs, such as the Bicycle Safety Education Program.

The committee already has plans to expand the pedestrian/bicycle infrastructure around Clover Ridge and Timber Ridge schools so that children who live in roughly a thousand homes in the adjacent neighborhoods will be able to safely walk or bike to school. This will allow the school district to eliminate additional bus routes that serve students who live within walking distance, saving approximately \$26,000 per year for each route eliminated, not including fuel and maintenance costs. The committee is also focused on expanding the program into more schools, beginning with elementary schools and eventually moving to middle and high schools. The goal is to eventually involve all twenty-two schools in the district.

In addition, the committee is working on starting both a bike swap and a rain gear swap, hoping to encourage more children to walk or bike to school, even during rainy Oregon winters. The swaps would allow parents to bring in bicycles and raincoats, rain boots, and ponchos that their children have outgrown and swap them out for the proper sizes. Program volunteers would tune up the used bicycles before trading them out. Such a program would have the added benefit of ensuring that the bikes children are riding are safe, properly sized, and well maintained.

Finally, the committee expects greater parental involvement as the program moves into the future. Some think that having a coordinator will help get information about the program out to parents and make the program more visible, which will serve to recruit and involve more parents. “My hope for the future is to actually see more kids walking and biking to school on a regular basis, and that would be driven, in large part, by parents getting involved and modeling the kinds of practices that work,” City Manager Hare said. “So that someday we won’t have to have SRTS committees, we will just have parents realizing that it makes sense in terms of economic considerations and health to have kids walk and bike.”

Endnotes

1 National Safe Routes to School Task Force, *Safe Routes to School: A Transportation Legacy* (Chapel Hill, N.C., July 2008), www.saferoutesinfo.org/task_force/collateral/task_force_report.web.pdf (accessed November 17, 2009); and S. Martin and S. Carlson, “Barriers to Children Walking to or from School—United States, 2004,” *MMWR Weekly* 54, no. 38 (September 2005): 949–952, reprinted in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* 294, no. 17 (November 2005): 2160–2162, jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/reprint/294/17/2160 (accessed November 17, 2009).

- 2 Jeffery Levi et al., *F as in Fat 2009: How Obesity Policies Are Failing in America* (Washington, D.C.: Trust for America’s Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, July 2009), 5, healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2009/Obesity2009Report.pdf (accessed November 17 2009).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 4 National Safe Routes to School Task Force, *Safe Routes to School*, 2.
- 5 Federal Highway Administration, “Priority, Market-Ready Technologies and Innovations List: Roundabouts,” U.S. Department of Transportation, www.fhwa.dot.gov/crt/lifecycle/roundabouts.cfm (accessed November 18, 2009).
- 6 Jan Hoffman, “Why Can’t She Walk to School,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/fashion/13kids.html (accessed November 9, 2009).
- 7 National Safe Routes to School Task Force, *Safe Routes to School*, 2. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, injuries resulting from motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for people in all age groups from 2 to 34; see Federal Highway Administration, “Traffic Safety Facts: 2006 Data,” 1, www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/810809.PDF.
- 8 Martin and Carlson, “Barriers to Children Walking to or from School,” 2162.

Safe Routes to School Resources

National Center for Safe Routes to School (SRTS)

- National Center for Safe Routes to School website, www.saferoutesinfo.org/
- SRTS Online Guide, www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/
- Program development tip sheets, www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/program-development_tip-sheets.cfm
- State SRTS coordinator contacts, www.saferoutesinfo.org/contacts/index.cfm
- National Center for Safe Routes to School, *Safe Routes to School: Case Studies from Around the Country* (Chapel Hill, N.C., July 2009), drusilla.hsrc.unc.edu/cms/downloads/srts_case_studies.pdf
- National Safe Routes to School Task Force, *Safe Routes to School: A Transportation Legacy* (Chapel Hill, N.C., July 2008), www.saferoutesinfo.org/task_force/collateral/task_force_report.web.pdf
- National Center for Safe Routes to School, *Many Steps . . . One Tomorrow: A Report on the First Three Years of the National Safe Routes to School Program* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/collateral/status_report/SRTS_3-year_report.pdf

Safe Routes to School National Partnership

- Safe Routes to School National Partnership website, www.saferoutespartnership.org/

- Safe Routes to School National Partnership, “Simple Steps to Get Started with Safe Routes to School: Resources and Information for Schools,” www.saferoutespartnership.org/media/file/school_resources--health_and_green_version.pdf
- Safe Routes to School National Partnership, “State Policies: Best Practices,” www.saferoutespartnership.org/state/5638
- Margo Pedroso and Robert Ping, *Safe Routes to School State Network Project: Final Report, 2007–2009* (Safe Routes to School National Partnership, November 2009), www.rwjf.org/files/research/51268srtsfinalreport09.pdf

International Walk to School in the USA

- International Walk to School in the USA website, www.walktoschool-usa.org/
- Planning International Walk to School Day, www.walktoschool-usa.org/getstarted/index.cfm

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, “Safe Routes to School,” September 2002, www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/bike/Safe-Routes-2002/index.html

Federal Highway Administration

- Federal Highway Administration, “Safe Routes to School,” safety.fhwa.dot.gov/saferoutes/
- Federal Highway Administration, “Bicycle and Pedestrian Programs,” www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bikeped/index.htm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Kids Walk-to-School,” www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/

Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center

- Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center website, www.pedbikeinfo.org/

About Albany

Form of government: Council-manager

City council: Seven members, including a mayor

Population: 49,222

Population under 18: 12,393

Median age: 34.9 years

Median household income: \$46,320

Location: Albany is located in West-Central Oregon at the confluence of the Calapooia and Willamette rivers, in the Willamette River Valley. It is about 75 miles south of Portland and 51 miles north of Eugene. It is located in both Linn and Benton counties and is the seat of Linn County.

Population: Albany’s population is just over 91 percent white, and no other racial or ethnic group comprises more than 1.5 percent of the population. At nearly 15 percent, Albany’s poverty rate is higher than the state and national rates (13.3 percent and 13.1 percent, respectively). Of Albany’s population living below the poverty line, nearly 30 percent are children. Just over 21 percent of the population aged 25–64 has completed a bachelor’s degree or higher. While this is lower

than national and state rates (29.3 percent and 29.5 percent, respectively), nearly 40 percent of the Albany population has completed some college or an associate’s degree, which is higher than both the national and state rates (29.3 percent and 35.0 percent, respectively). Ten percent of the population in this age group has not completed high school. This is on par with the state level (10.6 percent) and lower than the national level (13.0 percent).

School system: The Greater Albany Public School District has 9,170 students in sixteen elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools, and one alternative school. The district, which is the thirteenth-largest in Oregon, encompasses the city of Albany, as well as the cities of Tangent and Millersburg and the outlying areas of Linn and Benton counties. School district enrollment, which has increased by 14 percent since 2001 and by 27 percent since 1990, is projected to grow an additional 12 percent between 2009 and 2019. As a result of this growth, the district opened Timber Ridge School, its first new school in over thirty years, at the beginning of the 2009–2010 school year.

Sources: All demographic data are taken from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, “2006–2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates,” factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en. The data for Albany are from the Albany, Oregon, urban cluster, which includes the areas of Albany in both Linn and Benton Counties. The poverty data are only for families and households below the poverty level, not at the poverty level. State and national data are also from the “2006–2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.” School system data are from the Greater Albany Public School District, *An Introduction to the Greater Albany Public School District* (2008–2009), albany.k12.or.us/departments/business/documents/0809_budget_guide.pdf.



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