Safe Routes to Schools:

How Kids Are Getting to School Under Their Own Power!

By John W. Corrigan

What could be more natural than elementary school children safely walking and/or riding bicycles between home and school?

For New Hampshire communities participating in Safe Routes to School (SRTS), it turns out that such a simple idea can be complicated by issues of geography, economics, safety, and culture.

Cities, towns and school districts all over the Granite State, from Colebrook to Nashua and Portsmouth to Keene, have spent the last 10 years trying to reverse a decades-long trend toward children riding to school in the family motor vehicle. Looking toward the future, many of the lessons from SRTS are being incorporated into the new Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP).

SRTS is now thought of as a "legacy" program. All available funds for infrastructure projects have been awarded. Projects have been scheduled through the 2018 construction season. Limited funds remain available for seed money in the form of startup grants. Funds also continue to be available for school travel plans focusing on bicycling and walking.

Projects eligible under the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act – a Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) remain eligible under TAP. The new approach offers greater flexibility to communities by combining both school and general community bicycle and pedestrian projects. TAP was funded initially under the Moving Ahead for Progress for the 21st Century (MAP-21) and now under the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act). The New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) has determined that these funds are most efficiently used for infrastructure projects. They are no longer available for the non-infrastructure efforts. Also, the reimbursement rate has been reduced, from 100 percent to 80 percent.

The next TAP round is expected to start in 2018, with awards announced in 2019. Developing a competitive application will require thoughtful planning, so local leaders should start thinking about their projects now.

Educators, parents, and municipal officials in the Town of Littleton have embraced the SRTS concept. It is not unusual to see groups of self-propelled youngsters approaching the Mildred C. Lakeway Elementary School from multiple directions. Some walk along the crumbling sidewalk on Pleasant Street. Bicyclists gather at the Littleton Bike and Fitness shop, ride across the Ammonoosuc River, turn right at Union Street and pedal toward the school.

By participating, Littleton became part of an international movement that began in Denmark in the late 1970s. According to the National Center for Safe Routes to School, the first SRTS projects in the United States began in the Bronx, New York; Marin County, California; and Arlington, Massachusetts. Advocates took their message to Congress, which in 2005 approved a national program. In the Granite State, the program was started by NHDOT in late 2006, in partnership with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

SAFETEA-LU provided funding to reimburse costs for building bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure while promoting a

SOURCE - NH Town & City March/April 2017

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culture of safe walking and bicycling. The program serves children, including those with disabilities, in kindergarten through eighth grade. Projects within two miles of school are eligible.

If all goes as planned during the 2017 construction season, that crumbling sidewalk in Littleton will be rebuilt. Significant improvements will make the area surrounding the school much safer for young travelers.

SRTS and TAP find their greatest success in communities where a local "sparkplug" recognizes a need for improvements and organizes community resources to address it. In Littleton's case, the local leader was a parent and pediatrician who was seeing too many overweight and obese children in her medical practice. When she learned of SRTS, the advantages of burning off calories with a brisk walk or bicycle ride clicked. Under her leadership, the idea was embraced by both school and municipal officials and supported by parents. Town meeting voters raised additional local funds when it was recognized that a SRTS grant could not fully fund the project.

The thinking behind SRTS and TAP reflects philosophies of multi-modal transportation, Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS), and Complete Streets. For the school program, advocates recognized that our methods of moving students from home to school and back relied too heavily on private motor vehicles. The objective of SRTS is not to get kids off school buses, the public transportation system for school students.

Why has SRTS been useful as both a transportation and public health program?

Many of today's parents remember the tales of their own parents. The standard joke is that children used to walk miles to school through deep snow, uphill in both directions. That has changed over the past five decades, as children spend their time waiting in congested school-zone traffic. In the meantime, the country was plagued by what has been termed an epidemic of childhood obesity. It is a condition that can often continue into adulthood with the negative effects of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and other ailments affected by lifestyle choices.

Physical activity had been engineered out of the daily lives of sedentary children, who often return home from school and spend their spare time in front of televisions, computers and the other screens of modern technology.

An obvious way to chip away at the problem is to get kids outside and active. Walking or riding a bicycle offered a pollution-free way to travel the short distance between home and school for kids living within the two-mile radius.

Why do parents drive their kids to school? The reasons are as varied as the communities that have embraced SRTS. Fear is often cited. In some areas, the local road system does not provide a safe place to walk or ride a bicycle. Violence against children is another reason in places where young children are reasonably afraid of bullies. Some parents will look at the sexual offender registry and identify a perceived predator living on a route to school.

SRTS organizers want to ensure that their efforts are both effective and economical. Solutions must be based on careful planning, and the program uses a concept known as the 5 E's. It is a model communities may find useful independent of federal funding:

Evaluation: Before a problem can be solved, it must be recognized. This begins with surveys to determine how children in a particular school are traveling between home and school. A survey sent home to parents identifies their concerns and reasons for driving kids to school.

Education: Safe techniques for walking and bicycling may seem second-nature to adults, but children must learn ideas like looking left, then right, then left again before crossing a street. Safe riding techniques, including helmet use, can contribute to safe travel for children on bicycles.

Encouragement: These are the efforts to communicate to children that walking and bicycling are a good idea and approved by the community-at-large. They can include everything from friendly competition among classrooms to offering small prizes as a reward for participants.

Enforcement: Motorists who drive too fast near schools or fail to stop at marked crosswalks are a genuine threat to children. Visible law enforcement and tickets or warnings can encourage safe driving.

Engineering: This term is used to describe the infrastructure improvements that create safe travel routes. Most SRTS reimbursement grants are used for sidewalks. Bicycle lanes give young cyclists a place to ride separated from motor-vehicle travel lanes. Other improvements include speed-feedback signs and marked crosswalks at intersections. Because SRTS is intended to serve students of all physical and mental abilities, all SRTS projects must meet the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Tip-down ramps are a common improvement.

Program advocates recognize that people who live and work in a community understand local conditions and have a better understanding of what is possible than does state

government. A first step is organizing a SRTS local task force. This brings together the key local people. Principals, nurses, physical education teachers and other faculty members ensure that the school perspective is taken into account. Municipal administrators, including public works or similar officials, manage construction projects on public property and ensure maintenance after a project is built. Community people interested civic improvement in general, and bicycling and walking efforts, provide additional input.

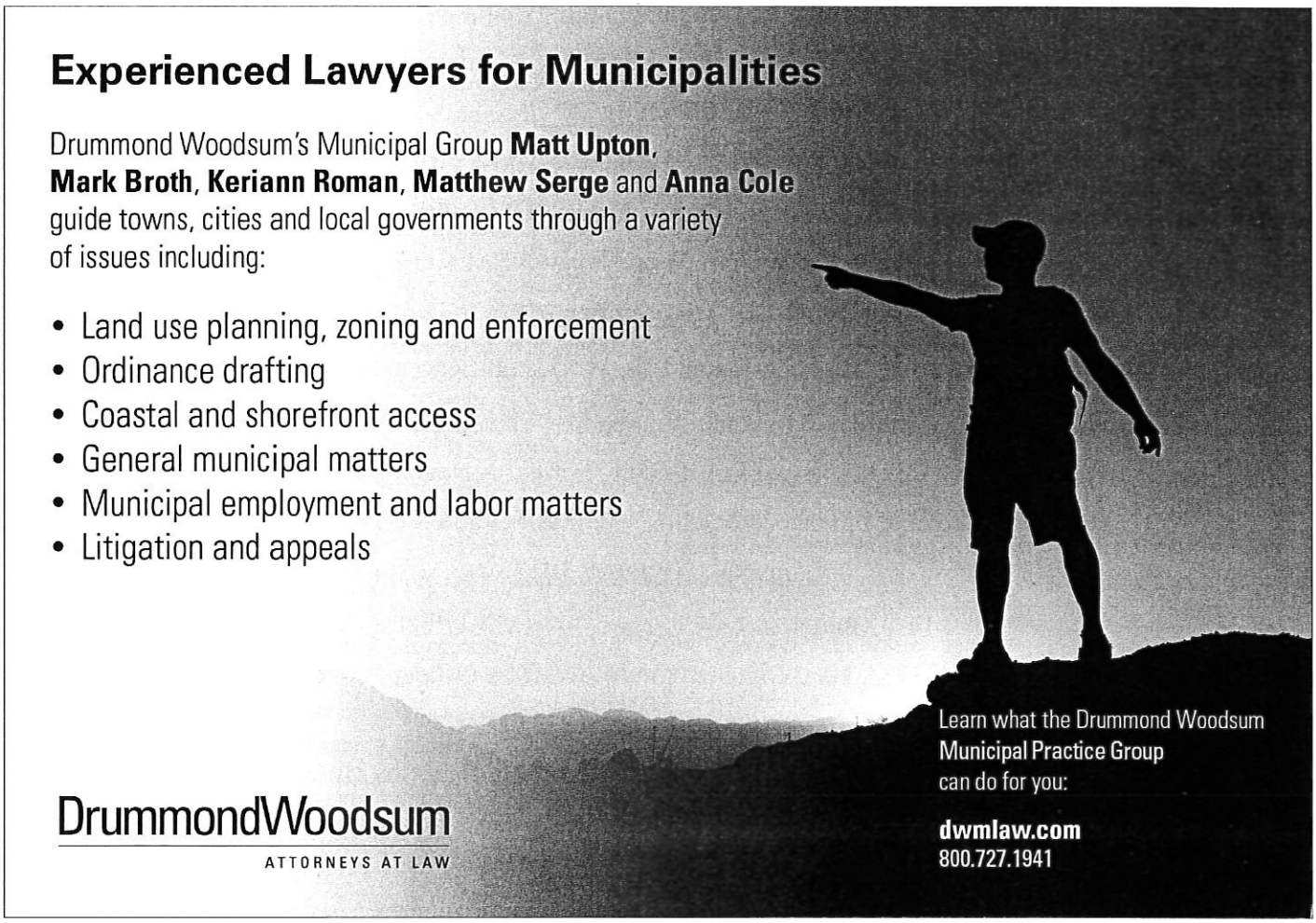
If pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure is in place, safety can be enhanced by what are known as escort programs. Two major forms are in place:

Walking school buses: In this approach, children meet at a central location and walk to school together. They are usually accompanied by an adult volunteer or school staff member. Children find safety in numbers, as bullies are unlikely to harass a group of students walking together. Adult supervision also ensures that children stay on the sidewalks and marked crosswalks and keep an eye out for traffic while crossing the street. Some walking school buses will meet up with additional groups as they approach the school.

Rolling bike trains: This is the same approach, but the kids ride bicycles along with their adult supervisors.

Both of these approaches can be supplemented by remote drop-off locations. Instead of driving all the way to school, parents and bus drivers can have their passengers meet other kids gathering for the walk or bicycle ride. This can help reduce traffic congestion in the immediate vicinity of the school.

Federal funds can play a significant role in balancing our transportation system. If SRTS and TAP inspire more local commitment to invest in non-motorized forms, we will breathe easier while enjoying commutes that raise the heart rate instead of our blood pressure.

For more information, contact me.

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