

TrendLines

SSCRPC — Advising + Planning + Evaluating + Leading

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THE TOPIC: Safe Routes to School

It is often with mixed emotions that parents send their children off to school. Each morning moms and dads find themselves hopeful that the morning school bell leads to another productive day of learning that will benefit their child throughout his or her life, but also hesitant and hopeful that the school day will be a safe one. We want to protect our children and ensure that they are safe when they are out of our sight.

Of course the school districts and municipalities where the children reside share this concern, and not just for the safety of the child in the school building or on the playground, but as they travel to-and-from the school site.

This concern is not unreasonable for children who travel by car as motor vehicle crashes in which children are passengers are the leading cause of death for school-age children according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

While many children travel to school by bus rather than auto, this generates a different set of concerns and considerations. These considerations include such things as the congestion-related costs of operating a vehicle as well as the growing cost of busing itself.

For example, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that school



traffic can account for 25% of morning traffic in cities around the nation, leading to traffic snarls and decreased safety around schools. And according to the National Center for Education Statistics, school transportation operating costs in the US now exceed \$14 billion annually; second only to salaries as a school district budget expense.

Students walking and biking to-and-from school help to offset transportation costs, but generate a new set of safety concerns.

Fortunately there is some help available to municipalities and school districts wishing to address the concerns that arise from children walking or biking to school. The **Safe Routes to School (SRTS)** program is specifically designed to help municipalities and school districts address these problems, and this issue of *TrendLines* is intended to make more people aware

of the benefits that SRTS can provide.

And there are a number of benefits provided by SRTS that encourage safe walking or biking to school. And safe walking and biking can result in additional benefits to children.

For example, the US Department of Health and Human Services recommends that children have at least 60 minutes of physical exercise daily. Yet the Centers for Disease Control found that for children ages 9 to 13 years, 62% did not participate in any organized physical activity and 23% did not engage in any free-time physical activity outside of school hours.

Walking and biking to school can provide some of the physical activity children need, and SRTS can provide the resources necessary for safety.

The Safe Routes to School Program

The Federal Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program is a national effort to enable and encourage children, including those with disabilities, to safely walk and bike to school. In a wider sense, SRTS programs can aid children's well being and health, ease traffic congestion near schools, and improve air quality and a community's overall quality of life.

The Federal SRTS program was created by Section 1404 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient, Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) signed into public law on August 10, 2005. Housed in the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Office of Safety, the SRTS program was funded at \$612 million over five federal fiscal years (FY 2005-2009). Congress has extended the program at \$183 million per year starting in FY 2010. Funding has remained the same for FY 2011 through continuing Transportation Act reauthorizations.



In Illinois, the SRTS program is administered by the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT). SRTS projects are funded at 100% with no local match requirement. SRTS is a reimbursement program, so the Sponsoring Agency — a municipality, for example — is responsible for fronting project costs.

The concept of SRTS is one of promoting and advocating healthy behavior in children. In an effort to accomplish this idea, SRTS programs require additional funding streams to remain sustainable and solvent throughout its duration. Other potential funding sources have been identified in the "Funding Options" section of this *TrendLines* on page 7.

Types of SRTS Grants Available

IDOT categorizes SRTS applications into two types of grants; *Infrastructure* and *Non-Infrastructure*. One Infrastructure grant application as well as one Non-Infrastructure grant application is allowed for each Illinois school district in each SRTS funding cycle.

Eligible **Infrastructure projects** may include, but are not limited to:

New Sidewalks	Striping	Turning Lanes
Sidewalk Repair	Pedestrian Countdown Signals	Roadway Realignment
Roundabouts	Pick-up/Drop-off Points	Traffic Signs
Bulb-outs	Median Refuges	Wide Shoulders
Speed Bumps	Pedestrian Bridge/Tunnel	Bike Racks
Traffic Signals	Bike Lanes	Safety Lighting

Types of SRTS Grants (Continued)

There are some limitations placed on SRTS Infrastructure Grant applications. There is:

- A \$250,000 maximum funding limit per application, and only three projects may be submitted per application.
- A \$2,000 funding minimum per project.
- A limitation on where an SRTS Infrastructure project may be located in that it must be within two miles of the target school.

Application sponsors may include municipalities, counties, townships or park districts. School districts and non-profit organizations may not sponsor applications, but should certainly be involved in the development of the project and application for the grant.

Of course the **SRTS Non-Infrastructure grants** are directed toward a different set of purposes. These may include, but are not limited to:

Equipment for Enforcement Activities	Education Materials	Modest Rewards for Contests
Crossing Guard Training	Bicycle Rodeos	Events
Speed Feedback Devices	Promotional Materials	Costs of Data Gathering, Printing and Mailing

Many of the requirements for the Non-Infrastructure projects are similar to the SRTS Infrastructure ones. For example the \$2,000 funding minimum and the limitation of three projects per application remain the same. However, the Non-Infrastructure grants have a \$100,000 funding limit per application. School districts, along with municipalities, counties, townships, park districts and non-profit organizations, are allowed as sponsoring organizations for the Non-Infrastructure grants.

The School Travel Plan

An approved School Travel Plan is a prerequisite when applying for federal Safe Routes to School funding in Illinois, and it serves as an outline for a school's intention to make traveling to and from school more safe and sustainable. It is also the first step in a successful Safe Routes to School program.

This plan is intended to identify the barriers to active transportation and formulates a set of solutions to address them. It is created through a team-based process and developed in consultation with the whole school community. It should be seen as an important tool in improving student and community health, safety, traffic congestion and air quality.

School Travel Plans are reviewed by IDOT for completeness, and an approved and updated School Travel Plan is required for each funding cycle in which federal funds are requested. A School Travel Plan is a good resource to use when applying for other funding opportunities.



Creating a School Travel Plan for Your SRTS Program

As with most programs and projects, bringing the right people together is essential for a strong and successful SRTS program. The first step is to identify people who want to make walking and bicycling to school safe and appealing for children. Sharing interests, concerns and knowledge among a variety of community members with diverse expertise can enable groups to tackle many different safety issues.

Engaging existing groups associated with a school or schools that are the focus of a SRTS program application is a natural fit. Such groups may consist of:

The School's PTA/PTO	Business Partners in the School's Enrollment Area	Mayor or Village Board President and Other Relevant Elected Officials
Teachers (especially special education, health and physical education)	Local Community Members and Leaders	Public Health Staff
School Principals and Other Administrators	Neighborhood Associations in the School's Enrollment Area	The Local Police Department
School Nurses	Local Bicycle Clubs	Public Works and Transportation Agency Representatives
School Crossing Guards	Groups Representing People with Disabilities	Churches and Local Service Groups in the Community and School Enrollment Area

Planning the School Travel Plan should also include the involvement of area children. This allows the program to learn more about what is important to them with respect to their experiences related to travel to school. Enquire about whether they would walk or ride their bikes to school with friends if given the choice, rather than be driven or bused. They should be asked about what they would change about their current commute to school, and what they like and dislike about their route to school. It is particularly important to include students with disabilities in this and other parts of the school travel planning process.



It is also important to engage school officials in the planning process. Building their trust in the plan and project is paramount to creating a successful School Travel Plan and SRTS program. For example, it is important to not interrupt class time or compete with afterhours events. Since school staff are often over-committed and under-resourced, the less work school officials have to do to implement and advance the plan, and the fewer the complications a safe travel plan creates for the instructional day, the more successful the program will likely be. Once trust is established, ask school officials to share the 'vision' of the program and provide access to the children and families to promote the program and become advocates for it.

Having a group of advocates for the School Travel Plan is important. Schools with successful SRTS programs attribute their success in part to a program champion, someone who has enthusiasm and time to provide leadership for the group and keep things moving along. A champion, however, can not do everything alone, they need support. Developing the next generation of leaders along the way will ensure that the program is sustainable.

Steps to SRTS Planning Success : Hold a Start-Off Meeting

Appropriately marketing a meeting to start the School Travel Plan and SRTS planning process is key to ensuring the involvement of sufficient and active participants. The start-off meeting has two essential goals: to establish a vision for the School Travel Plan and to generate the subsequent steps.

One approach is to ask participants to share their vision for the school five years into the future. Responses may include statements such as: "safe walkways", "fewer children being dropped off to school", and "more physically active children". These comments focus the group on positive issues and engage the group in a quest of determining how to achieve their positive vision. Adults sharing stories from their youth about how they walked or biked to school also creates positive thoughts for the program.

At the meeting a presentation of the SRTS program should be given. Included in the presentation should be issues and strategies related to the "5 E's" of travel safety: Engineering, Enforcement, Education, Encouragement and Evaluation. Participants may then discuss the next steps regarding the best way to work toward the vision. The vision could include statements such as, "a healthy, more active community for our children", "an environment that encourages children to use physical activity for transportation", and the like.

Forming committees may aid in separating tasks. Examples of committees that may be formed include:

Outreach Committee: Collects input from parents, teachers and students, and publicizes the program to the school and community.

Education and Encouragement Activities Committee: Works closely with the school administration and teachers to put education and encouragement activities in place, gathers materials for activities, and solicits donations for programming and prizes from the school's business partners.

Enforcement and Engineering Committee: Develops recommendations for enforcement and engineering solutions. Works together with local government and other resources to find funding and make improvement.

Traffic Safety Committee: Identifies unsafe driving behavior near the school and develops an education campaign to increase awareness.

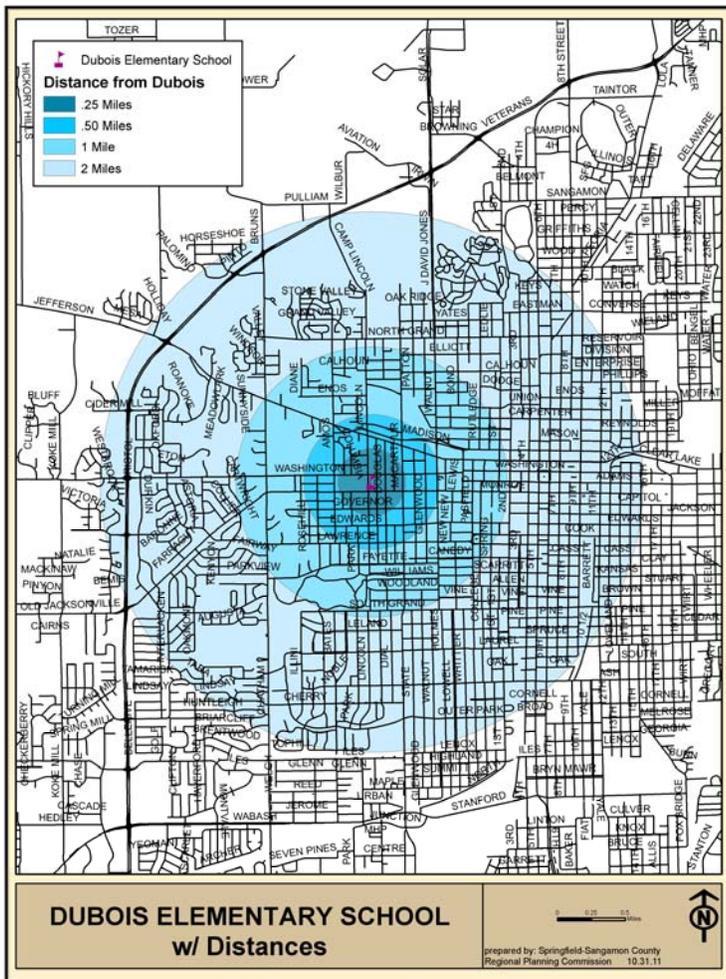
Mapping and Information Committee: Creates maps, collects information about where children live, the routes they take to school, and the condition of the street and sidewalk network along the way, including accessibility barriers for children with disabilities.



Step Two: Gather Information and Identify the Issues

The next effort that needs to be undertaken is to collect the information needed for an informative and useful plan. The goals of collecting information include, of course, identifying the needed work and program elements, but it is also important to identify the information that will later be needed to measure the impact of the program once it is implemented.

Information collection must always be done in the context of the particular school or schools for which the plan is being developed. The map to the left below, for example, shows Springfield's Dubois elementary school and surrounding distances from one-quarter to two miles in radius.



First, gauge the walking and bicycling conditions for students. Utilize the maps produced showing the routes taken by students to get to school. Gathering injury data, traffic counts and speed data will aid in identifying driver-related safety issues. Making observations at arrival and dismissal times will help gain a collective understanding of issues such as: safety, accessibility and congestion. Finding out about existing school policies that may make it easier or more difficult to walk or bicycle to school can also be useful. Second, determine how many children currently walk or bike to school.

Using our example of the Dubois Elementary School, those preparing the plan may find that school and school district staff may already have much of the needed data already on hand. Parent surveys can be used to understand parents' attitudes toward walking and bicycling to school, and help identify the barriers to walking and bicycling that need to be addressed.

Step Three: Identify Solutions

Solutions to issues identified by the group will include a combination of education, encouragement, engineering and enforcement strategies. Safety is the first consideration.

Should it not be safe for children to walk or bicycle to school, then they should only be encouraged to do so after safety issues have been addressed.

Some problems may require engineering solutions; others may require education, encouragement, enforcement or a combination of strategies. The expertise of the program's partners is a valuable asset in these cases.

It is likely that a long list of ideas and potential solutions will be generated by the coalition. Prioritization of the ideas and solutions will make the list easier to manage. Critical issues should take the lead in prioritization. 'Low hanging fruit' solutions identified by the group can aid to generate early enthusiasm for the program.

Step Four: Develop the SRTS Plan

To be effective, the SRTS plan should include:

- Strategies that address encouragement, enforcement, education and engineering;
- A time schedule for each part of these strategies;
- A map of the area covered by the plan; and
- A detailed explanation of how the program will be evaluated.

As noted previously, strategies that are 'low-hanging fruit' will help the group feel successful and can build momentum and support for more lofty activities and goals. It is important to make activities fun. After all, children are the main focus of a SRTS program. Much of what is contained in the plan will be decided on with the group's input.

Step Five: Consider Funding Options and Seek SRTS Funding

Some of the activities in a SRTS program can be accomplished with volunteers and/or little funding. There are also many low-cost engineering solutions that can be implemented in a short amount of time such as painting crosswalks and installing signage. Other activities, such as new sidewalk construction, may require a large amount of capital. Several funding streams for SRTS programs exist. The first, of course, is the State's SRTS Program, which was mentioned earlier in this *TrendLines*. Other potential funding opportunities for infrastructure improvements also exist, such as:

- IDOT Transportation Enhancement Program grants (www.dot.il.gov/opp/itep) and Highway Safety Improvement Program (www.dot.il.gov/illinoisshsp/hsip.html).
- The Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources Recreational Trail program (<http://dnr.state.il.us/orep/planning/rtptxt.htm>).

Non-infrastructure funding opportunities may include:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Health and Physical Activity grants (www.cdc.gov/Features/Obesityandkids).
- National Highway Transportation Safety Administration's Section 402 Traffic Safety, Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety funds (<http://www.nhtsa/whatsup/tea21/tea21programs/pages/PedBikeSafety.htm>).

Some municipalities may be able to provide funding in support of SRTS activities, and there are also philanthropic organizations that have been supportive of encouraging greater opportunities to walk or bike, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Child Obesity Grant Program (www.rwjf.org/grants).

Health care systems and business partnerships may also be interested in supporting such efforts.

Some municipalities have also instituted policy changes to advance such efforts. In Portland, OR, for example, a portion of an increase in fines for speeding and red-light running goes to a comprehensive pilot SRTS program at 25 elementary schools. The program has generated over \$1.2 million in the first two years. In May 1996, the State of Washington enacted legislation that doubles fines for speeding in school zones. The legislation was in direct response to community and citizen concerns. Furthermore, the legislation stipulated that half the double fine go directly to improving school zone safety. During the pilot phase of this project in the year 2000, no school children were injured or killed in motor vehicle collisions. Other project results include providing school jurisdictions with reflective vests for school crossing guards, sponsoring community events, installing new fluorescent yellow-green signs, increasing police presence near schools, enhancing community policing, and fostering a general perception of a safer environment for children.

Step Six: Put the Plan into Action

Certain activities can be accomplished without major funding, so some parts of the program can begin immediately while waiting for funding to achieve other more robust parts of the program.

Start the program with a fun-filled kick-off event. Media involvement at this event will help boost awareness with an interesting story with local flavor. As an example, a good kick-off event might be the International Walk to School Day or a Walking Wednesday celebration. Should the school be located too far for some students to walk or bike, efforts might be made to locate remote drop-off locations so that those students may also participate in the event. Inclusion of all students in special events and daily activities in the SRTS program should be emphasized. Encouragement, enforcement, education and engineering strategies will all come together as pieces of the plan are implemented.



Daily programs such as a Walking School Bus (WSB) provide reoccurring, sustained, and healthy activity for students. A WSB is similar to a regular school bus in that groups of children join together to walk to or from school. A WSB can be as simple as two families taking turns walking their children to school, or may be more formally structured with meeting points, schedules, and a regular rotation of trained volunteers. Programs such as a WSB can be made fun and safe with adult volunteer supervision. The following steps can be used to create a WSB program:

- Advertise the program to both students and parents. Opportunities exist at the Back-to-School Meeting in the fall, at PTA conference nights, and through announcements in newsletters and folders children take home.
- Register participants.
- Train recruits that will assist in the WSB. Recruits might include: parents, college students (especially in health fields), and community volunteers (especially seniors). Interaction with a caring parent or adult volunteer increases the visibility of the program.
- Develop a safety code for leaders who will teach pedestrian safety to school children. Good strategies include: Being visible (sponsor purchased T-shirts), walking not running, staying on the sidewalks, walking sensibly, walking together as a group, and crossing streets at a crosswalk or intersection.
- Plan the routes; plot each registered student's house in GIS to develop a route. Identify the condition and existence of sidewalks along the route.

Step Seven: Evaluate, Make Improvements & Keep Moving!

Once the program is underway, careful monitoring will identify which strategies are increasing the number of school children safely walking and bicycling to school. Proper adjustments to the plan can be made as this and other new information is gathered. A simple evaluation measure is to re-count the number of walkers and bicyclists and compare this number to the baseline findings compiled at the start of the program.

The group brought together to develop and advance the plan also needs to consider how to sustain interest in the program and the energy supporting it so that children continue to walk and bicycle to school safely. Key strategies for keeping the program going may include:

- Identifying additional enthusiastic program champions.
- Sharing SRTS successes with others by getting visibility for activities through local media and school communications that publicize SRTS activities.
- Making the work fun and positive, as this will in turn make people want to continue it and involve more participants.
- Encouraging local transportation policy changes, particularly school, school district or local government policies that support children walking and bicycling to school.
- Suggesting that municipal and school district planning departments promote new school construction within walking and bicycling distance of the residential areas they serve.
- Advancing adoption of a safety curriculum in the school district as a means of continuing pedestrian and bicycle education for children.
- Creating a permanent committee within the PTA, school site council, and as an element within student governance so that the SRTS effort will continue to receive attention, energy and guidance.



A SRTS program has the potential to improve walking and bicycling conditions near a school as well as spread interest into other parts of the community. Coalitions that persist in their efforts and make measurable improvements based on their evaluation will be rewarded with safer places for children to walk and bicycle and more children choosing safe routes to school.

Successful SRTS Applications

It is possible to successfully compete for SRTS funding, and several communities in the SSCRPC planning area have been recipients in recent years. Often the creation of a successful SRTS project will lead to other eligible opportunities for funding.

Infrastructure Projects SRTS grants have been awarded to:



- Illiopolis' Sangamon Valley CUSD #9. This \$235,000 project involved the construction, replacement or repair of sidewalks associated with Illiopolis Elementary School.

- Sherman and Williamsville's joint submission for CUSD #15. This \$231,000 project involved the construction, replacement or repair of sidewalks associated with Sherman Elementary School and Williamsville Junior High School.

Non-Infrastructure Project SRTS grants have been awarded to:

- Several joint Sherman and Williamsville submissions for CUSD #15. These include a \$4,350 grant to obtain planning services for expanding and improving the existing SRTS plan for Sherman Elementary and Williamsville Jr. High, an \$8,400 award to organize a Bicycle Rodeo and a \$6,540 award to start a Walking School Bus program for those same schools.

- A Williamsville proposal for CUSD #15 that resulted in a \$6,225 grant for Williamsville Jr. High to use portable speed feedback trailers and signs.
- A Pawnee project for CUSD #11 that received a \$6,195 grant to utilize speed feedback trailers or signs at Pawnee Grade School.

Those interested in the SRTS grant program may want to contact these communities to learn more about their experiences with it.

Since SRTS involves federal funding, projects within the Metropolitan Planning Area must be included in the Springfield Area Transportation Study's (SATS) Transportation Improvement Program, commonly known as the "TIP". Communities interested in knowing more about SRTS or the TIP process are encouraged to contact the SSCRPC for additional information.

Information for this TrendLines prepared by Kyle Phillips, Transportation Planning Specialist, SSCRPC.

The SSCRPC encourages Sangamon County communities to share the information that they find concerning ways to encourage biking and walking, as well as their SRTS success stories, with other municipalities in the planning area. Information and examples may be submitted to the Commission, and these will be shared with other partners in the SSCRPC's information network.

For more information on SRTS activities, contact Kyle Phillips of the SSCRPC Transportation Planning staff, at 217-535-3110, or email the Commission at sscrpc@co.sangamon.il.us.



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Regularly Scheduled Events:

- The Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission meets in the Sangamon County Board Chamber at 9:30 AM on the third Wednesday of each month unless otherwise posted.
- The Springfield Area Transportation Study Technical Committee meets in Room 212 of the County Building at 8:30 AM on the first Thursday of each month, with the Policy Committee meeting at noon on the following Thursday, unless otherwise posted.
- The Sangamon County Historic Preservation Commission will meet in Room 212 of the County Building at 4:00PM on the first Wednesday of every month unless otherwise posted.

A complete schedule of SSCRPC events is maintained on the Commission's website.

ANY SSCRPC DOCUMENTS NOTED IN THIS *TrendLines*, AS WELL AS OTHER ANALYTIC WORK ON CURRENT TOPICS OF INTEREST, ARE AVAILABLE ON THE COMMISSION'S WEBSITE.

About the Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission



The Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission (SSCRPC) is the joint planning body for the City of Springfield and Sangamon County. Along with this ongoing responsibility, the Commission works with many other municipalities, public agencies, public-private entities and not-for-profits throughout the region to promote orderly growth and development.

The Commission that oversees this work is made up of 17 members, including representatives from the Sangamon County Board, Springfield City Council, special units of government, and six appointed citizens from the city and county.

Through the work of its professional staff, the Commission provides over-

all planning services related to land use, housing, recreation, transportation, economic development and redevelopment, and the environment, as well as special projects of local and regional interest. In carrying out these tasks, the SSCRPC conducts numerous research studies, analytic reviews and planning projects each year, all of which are made available on its website.

The SSCRPC also prepares area-wide planning documents and assists the county, cities, and villages, as well as special districts, with planning activities. In addition, the staff reviews all proposed subdivisions, makes recommendations on all Springfield and County zoning and variance requests, and serves as the Floodplain Administrator.

As it's name implies, it acts in many regional capacities. For example serving as the Metropolitan Planning Organization for transportation planning, directing the development of the Sangamon Regional Comprehensive Plan, providing assistance to the Citizens Efficiency Commission established by county-wide referendum in 2010, and serving as the A-95 review clearinghouse for the region.

The Commission's Executive Director is appointed by the Executive Policy Board of the Commission and confirmed by the Sangamon County board. He also serves as County Plats Officer and oversees the County's Department of Zoning.