

# Grand Rapids/Cohasset Safe Routes to School Plan Update

SRTS Team Meeting #1

November 6, 2020, 10:00 a.m.

Zoom Video/Audio Conference

## SUMMARY

### Introductions

Russell Habermann, Senior Planner at ARDC Planning, welcomed everyone and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

*Attendees:* Melanie DeBay (ISD 318 Community Ed. Director), Anna Johnson (Get Fit Itasca), Sean Martinson (West Rapids Elementary School Principal), Megan Severson (ISD 318 SRTS Coordinator), Jayme Smith (Itasca County SHIP), Eric Trast (City of Grand Rapids), Maren Webb (MnDOT District 1), Russell Habermann (ARDC Planning), Justin Otsea (ARDC Planning)

Habermann shared that Safe Routes to School planning is occurring in multiple Itasca County communities this academic year. He shared that this meeting would only address East Rapids Elementary School, West Rapids Elementary School, Cohasset Elementary School, and Elkington Middle School.

### Safe Routes to School 101

Habermann shared about Safe Routes to School and the potential benefits the program has (refer to slide deck). He then asked the SRTS Team what benefits they see for the Grand Rapids/Cohasset community specifically. SRTS Team members mentioned the following benefits:

- Lessening congestion in school zones
- Bringing awareness about existing trails
- Encouraging physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle
- Bridging the gap between biking for recreation and biking for transportation
- Addressing real and perceived community safety issues
- Teaching the public how to use new types of infrastructure (like bike lanes)
- Building trust that people can be safe while walking or biking (through making walking and biking safety improvements to roadways)
- Barrier: Busy schedules can prevent people from walking and biking to school

Habermann also shared about roles and expectations of SRTS Team members (refer to slide deck) and outlined the program's 7-"E" framework (Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, Engineering, Equity, Evaluation, and Engagement).

He then outlined the tentative SRTS planning project schedule as follows:

- October: Kick-off Meeting (Meeting #1)
- November: Data Collection (Ongoing Work/Assistance)

- December: Data Assessment
- January: Action Plan Development (Meeting #2)
- February: Plan Development
- March: Public Plan Review (Meeting #3)
- April: Final Revisions
- May: Plan Completion (Meeting #4)

Habermann then shared what to expect in the completed plan document, which is outlined below.

- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Vision
- Existing Conditions
- Issue Identification
- Action Plan
- Implementation Steps
- Evaluation Plan
- Appendices

Opening the floor for any discussion or questions, Habermann asked about the status of learning models in ISD 318 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Team members shared that K-2 is full in-person, 3-5 is hybrid, and middle school is hybrid. For schools in hybrid, no students are at school on Wednesdays. Also, there are families who opted to do full distance learning. Team members shared that caregivers seem to prefer dropping off and picking up students to sending them on the bus; also, it seems more students walk in the afternoons than in the mornings, but they may be going to an off-campus site (i.e. nearby apartment or another school) for their caregivers to pick them up.

Team members also shared things about students walking and biking they have noticed: Cohasset Elementary has few walkers due to Highway 2 as a barrier, students sometimes may walk to a friend's house or to an after-school program, and fewer students seem to be walking or biking to the new elementary school locations than they had to the previous school sites. It was noted that ISD 318 has an outdated SRTS Plan from 2014 that should be consulted during this planning process, that maps are being created for each school to demonstrate traffic flow and expectations for arrival and dismissal, and that there are one-mile hazard bussing zones for each school in the district.

### **Development of SRTS Team Vision Statement**

Habermann asked the SRTS Team to brainstorm about what they would like to see in the Grand Rapids/Cohasset community because of their work. The SRTS Team brought forward the following:

- Improvements to walking/biking infrastructure to enhance safety
- More encouragement around walking and biking
- More knowledge and support of walking and biking infrastructure
- Behavior change resulting in more students/people walking and biking
- More awareness about Safe Routes to School (from 10% of people knowing to 90%)

- Programs (i.e. walking school bus) that bring attention and awareness to walking and biking
- Programs that get kids physically active even for a portion of their trips to school (i.e. drop-and-walk in Cohasset, where Highway 2 is an obstacle)
- Understanding of perceived barriers that need to be addressed (example: a trail to West Rapids Elementary is isolated; plus, it is groomed for cross-country skiing and cannot be used by students walking during the winter)
- Education about walking and biking in driver's education classes

Habermann will take these ideas and create a draft Vision Statement for the SRTS Team to react to at the next meeting.

It was also noted that someone from Cohasset should be on the committee. Cohasset recently received state funding to make improvements in their downtown area, which may help make safety improvements for pedestrians crossing Highway 2. Also, the City of Grand Rapids has worked on sidewalk and trail connection projects in the past.

### **Coordination of Data Collection**

Habermann shared that the SRTS planning assistance grant requires a number of data collection methods, listed below. The SRTS Team went through the data collection methods and guided how each of these would be carried out, particularly considering COVID-19; notes for each are outlined below.

- School Environment and Policy Assessment – This assessment is like a checklist designed for school administrators to think through walking and biking accommodations at school sites and within school policy. Habermann will connect with principals from each school in coming weeks to complete these assessments.
- School Hazard Observation – This tool organizes the SRTS Team to observe arrival and dismissal observations at each school campus. Since school is not full in-person, the SRTS Team agreed that this observation could take place in the spring, with hopes of a full in-person school format.
- Caregiver Survey – MnDOT Central Office has provided a survey to collect caregiver perceptions about walking and biking, for digital distribution. The school district has digital communication methods, and Melanie DeBay will connect with Jessica Setness about best time frames and messaging for distributing the survey.
- Student Transportation Tally – This tool usually asks students in the classroom how they travelled to and from school on multiple days of the same week. Since school is not full in-person, the SRTS Team agreed that this tally could take place in the spring, with hopes of a full in-person school format.
- Walk Audit – This event is usually an in-person, on-site meeting to explore the walking environment around each school. MnDOT has suggested that SRTS Teams should consider alternatives to meeting in-person during the pandemic. Habermann shared opportunities where 360-degree photos could be taken, or a video from the perspective of a pedestrian could be prepared for virtual discussion. Team members suggested that a socially distanced walk audit could be organized or that a drone could be used to fly through the areas that should be discussed. Habermann shared that these possibilities will be considered by ARDC Planning as a walk audit event is planned, perhaps for December.

## **Making Information about Project Publicly Available**

Habermann shared that making information about the ISD 318 SRTS plan project available to the public is important for community buy-in. Team members shared that the following platforms exist for sharing information: school district website, community education website, school district social media, ICTV, community calendars, community newsletter, monthly school district communications to parents, Visit Grand Rapids website, community newspapers, Get Fit Itasca social media and website, and City of Grand Rapids website. Habermann shared that these options are good to know for the future and that posting a link to ARDC Planning's project webpage would help the public navigate to general information about the project.

When she connects with Jessica Setness about the survey, Melanie DeBay will also connect about posting a link on the district website. Habermann will also send a link to Eric Trast and Anna Johnson for posting on the City and Get Fit Itasca websites.

## **Next Steps**

- ARDC Planning will draft a vision statement to be reviewed at the next SRTS meeting.
- ARDC Planning will connect with school principals about filling out the School Environment and Policy Assessment.
- Melanie DeBay will connect with Jessica Setness about considerations for distributing the Caregiver Survey electronically. Habermann will provide any additional materials that are needed to support this distribution.
- ARDC Planning will design and implement a walk audit event (or online alternative) to help the SRTS Team discuss key barriers to walking and biking to each school campus.
- ARDC Planning will distribute a link to its project webpage to Melanie DeBay, Eric Trast, and Anna Johnson for distribution on their platforms.
- Megan Severson will reach out to the City of Cohasset to identify someone who could provide a Cohasset perspective on the SRTS Team.
- Megan Severson will reach out to Michelle Norris (School Resource Officer) about her desired involvement with the SRTS planning process.

**The meeting adjourned at 11:35 am.**