Executive Summary – ITD Safe Routes to School Technical Assistance Grants

Introduction

In the late spring of 2012, the Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) created and funded a new planning program providing planning expertise to help communities develop policies and action plans to address pedestrian and bicycle safety for school children. The process was conducted by a consultant team of Idaho Smart Growth and Vitruvian Planning who are trained in policy, engineering and encouragement strategies for Safe Routes to School and skilled in community team building. The action plans produced cover both infrastructure and non-infrastructure actions, as well as school, municipal and tribal policy and regulation. The plans are informed by members of the civic and school communities served and various data sources and policies or planning documents adopted by the city, tribe or school district. This small program created a depth of outcomes that represent a significant return on ITD's investment.

The project was intended to achieve various objectives including:

- Comprehensively examine walking and biking conditions on the route and near schools served.
- Review the support (or lack thereof) for walking and biking in policies and regulations currently adopted.
- Identify strategies, projects, methods and tools to promote increased safe walking and bicycling rates.
- Develop local teams with capacity and knowledge to comprehensively address the issues identified.
- Recommend projects, informed by the consultants and community team, consistent with goals.
- Identify and recommend modifications to policies to improve walking and biking conditions and roadway design.
- Study and share innovative or successful programs from throughout the state with all teams.
- Determine low-cost, effective strategies to improve conditions and share with the local team and leaders.

Testing the new crossing, Menan

The action plans are crafted as an informed list of infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects and policy improvements that have support throughout the community to be successful. In addition these action plans are designed to be consistent with various grant selection criteria and with policies, goals and programs of the transportation agencies serving them, including ITD.

Ten communities were selected to participate in the program, one withdrew, and another was assisted.

1. **Aberdeen** – *Aberdeen Elementary and Middle School*
2. **Caldwell** – *Washington Elementary and Syringa Middle School, also addressed specific issue at high school*
3. **Lapwai** – *Lapwai Elementary and Middle School*
4. **Kamiah** – *Kamiah Elementary and Middle School*
5. **Mackay** – *Mackay Elementary School*
6. **Menan** – *Midway ElementarySchool*
7. **Mud Lake** – *Terreton Elementary and Middle School*
8. **Rathdrum** – *John Brown Elementary and Lakeland Jr. High School*
9. **Sandpoint** – *Sandpoint Middle School*
10. **Rockland** – *Community had to withdraw after initial visit*
    a. **Pocatello** – *Syringa Elementary School**

Process

Upon selection of the grantees the consultants contacted the community team created for the application. They began gathering strategic information from each community and conducted an initial site visit. The purpose of the site visit was to meet with each community and the team they crafted to review the team make-up, and inform them about the mini-grant program, the goals of Safe Routes to School, and the project expectations and limits. The site visit allowed the consultants to conduct an initial site survey and observe typical conditions. Team knowledge was built through an educational presentation and walk audit conducted with team members.

***Rockland/Pocatello** – Early in the project the city of Rockland faced a high-priority issue that was all-consuming for its small staff and had to withdraw. The consultant team was asked to review and comment on a specific issue at Syringa Elementary School in Pocatello which received partial assistance.*

Subsequent monthly conference calls and webinars were held with each community to keep momentum with the project moving, to keep information flowing and to maintain the level of communication necessary for project effectiveness. This allowed the project team to describe in great detail recommended projects through the use of on-line maps, imagery, or document sharing. Grantees were able to voice concerns, share ideas, and ask questions of the planning team so there were no surprises or uncertainty.

Second Visit

Walk to School Day, Mackay

The second series of site visits was then planned and held in October 2012 to correspond with International Walk to School Day. The intent of the second visits were to further refine initial recommendations for projects, begin to recognize policy flaws or gaps, and to promote the non-infrastructure element of Safe Routes to School. By the time of the second visits communities were already well on their way to recognizing the changes they could make on their own versus those needing additional resources. Activities conducted included numerous walk to school events, a walk safety assembly, and a three day walk to school week event series.

Upon conclusion of the second round of on-site visits and the start of the new year, the team continued to reach out to grantees in the form of calls or webinars. This time was used to refine policy recommendations, add or amend previous infrastructure project recommendations, and to determine appropriate non-infrastructure activities for recommendation. The on-going discussion included information sharing among communities. Many of the project communities have already instituted positive and effective tools with to improve student safety. It was vital that the consultants shared information of those successes with the other teams so they could learn from each other.

During this time the consultants collected tools. These ranged from how to conduct a bike rodeo to technical briefs on curb radii and Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons (RRFB). They also researched and drafted model polices for use by the communities and discovered that each school district is required to have policy on wellness and transportation, but few communities had sections in these policies relating to Safe Routes to School. Model policies developed include: recognizing the benefits of routine physical activity in wellness and transportation; comprehensive plan goals supporting active transportation; ordinance language supporting pedestrian-friendly land-use designs; and connectivity measurements and polices.

Third Visit

Once the project team completed the final list of recommended projects, determined appropriate policy action steps and prepared the draft plan, a third site visit was held. The objective of this final visit was to present the plan document to an elected body for action or to the team and additional stakeholders who are a part of a larger influential group that can persuade a city council or school board to move the recommendations forward.

Hill Street, Kamiah

Also part of the final visit was one more opportunity to observe any short term solutions initially recommended and put into place. The consultants witnessed the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new Menan Community Track, and watched the crossing guard operate in Sandpoint. During our second visit to Mackay we were able to see the short term walkway improvements in action on Walk to School Day and while visiting Caldwell we got a look at the RRFBs they installed at school crossings citywide.

Finally, with the project wrapped up and action plans formalized, the project team met with ITD members to provide a final project summary presentation. The presentation was intended to demonstrate the value of all that had occurred, offer particular project highlights that have wider applicability and share a series of lessons learned. We also shared a brief summary of the action plans for each community and a list of the top recommendations in each.

Community Stories

Aberdeen

The Story *– Faced with the prospect of losing the Simplot potato processing plant and having a five-lane highway that bisects the town making it dangerous to walk or bike the community built a strong team to determine a vision for moving forward. That team is their strongest asset in implementing solutions.*
Steps Taken *– The city can use sign money to improve crossings, the team is drafting implementation grant proposals.*

Caldwell

The Story *– The city responded to a lack of ped/bike facilities with a strong plan including a multi-use pathway. However getting to the pathway has become an issue with on-street barriers and lack of connectivity limiting access to it. Improving conditions along and across roadways is a new focus.*
Steps Taken *– Using tools presented in this project, the city staff is constructing on-road solutions all over the city where they have discovered issues with safety and connectivity.*

Lapwai

The Story *– Headquarters of the Nez Perce Tribe the city, tribe and school district have had to learn how to identify responsibilities and priorities collaboratively.*
Steps Taken *– The team has proposed a project that touches all partners and is an opportunity to learn how to work together.*

Kamiah

The Story *– The city has a good core of existing sidewalks and connections, but also has three state highways running through it. Increasing safety on the highway system, providing maintenance of the core and serving growth in the county all present challenges.*
Steps Taken *– A grants administrator skilled at finding resources is facilitating collaboration and moving projects forward.*

Key Findings

We learned that every community had a highway that affects student safety in some way. This highlights the importance of considering student safety, and pedestrian/bike safety in general, as ITD designs projects. Those projects should be looked at through a lens of Context Sensitive Solutions where ITD highways travel through communities.

- A strong community team and champion produce success and long-term progress.
- Communication between the community and ITD district offices is vital to serving pedestrians and bicyclists in existing ITD projects and activities.
- Pedestrian/bicycle plans are often site specific improvements not a network.
- Sidewalks are widely required, but often not maintained, repaired or mapped.
- There is minimal recognition of how land use/transportation policy impacts on pedestrians /bicyclists, i.e. travel benefits of mixed use development or a connected system.
- Few transportation plans integrate pedestrian/bicycle improvements or address their needs comprehensively.
- School policy is mostly silent on benefits of routine physical activity.

Key Lessons Learned

- **Well supported local plans for pedestrians and bicyclists are vital –** Prior planning at the local level had paid off in several cases in needed pedestrian/ bicycle improvements as transportation projects were implemented (including on ITD highways), and in other instances the lack of a local plan resulted in no pedestrian/bicycle improvements or less useful improvements on the roadway and highway system.
- **Solutions that reflect a comprehensive analysis are more likely to get support –** From a crossing guard in Sandpoint to a dangerous highway crossing in Aberdeen, problems that have stubbornly evaded a solution can be overcome with a comprehensive approach that emphasizes information and solutions rather than barriers. By building a knowledgeable team, educating the community, and identifying the cause, effect, alternatives and other benefits the stubborn problem can become a community win.
- **Policy support can make a difference** – Most school districts policies fail to recognize the value of walking and biking to overall student health and academic performance, and many fail to offer support for Safe Routes to School. Sandpoint was an exception and their school programs and roadway improvements were the most robust. The other communities are interested in talking action by adopting some or all of the model policies developed.
- **A connected network makes walking and biking easier and more likely** – City (and tribal) policy support for walking and biking was mixed, with a consistent lack of recognition for the importance of connectivity and little policy support or contradictory regulations regarding access to destinations. Connections became obvious solutions when they were discovered.
- **Small community resources must be respected** – Small communities can be very nimble, e.g. Mackay acting in three weeks to implement a walkway. However resources, especially human resources, are limited and priorities, both personal and civic, must be honored. Don't push to spread public servants and community volunteers too thin.

….more Community Stories

Mackay

The Story *– The existing pathway plan has no funding, low cost solutions were found. Other priorities have slowed progress on the plan.*
Steps Taken *– By striping a walkway on the existing pavement, a safe place to walk was created at almost no cost.*

Menan

The Story *– The community has built a pathway and a determined volunteer had helped improve a dangerous highway crossing. Connections to the pathway and other roadway improvements languished.*
Steps Taken *– Improvements to crossings on Main St. and a transportation study are moving forward with city council support.*

Mud Lake

The Story *– A pathway connecting parts of this rural area was long dreamed of but has many challenges. Though other priorities have slowed progress and challenges remain, the plan outlines a way forward.*
Steps Taken *– The team has tools and information needed for success.*

Rathdrum

The Story *– The city and school district had collaborated on a great crossing guard system and have a strong pathway plan. On-road improvements were lagging.*
Steps Taken *– the school implemented a strong encouragement program and the city is reviewing signage and other improvements.*

Sandpoint

The Story *– The school district has the strongest Safe Routes program of all the communities and the city implementation of roadway improvements is very strong. Access points to the school are quite limited. There was no support for hiring a crossing guard.*
Steps Taken *– A crossing guard was hired, all concluded it was the best solution possible.*

Aha! Discoveries

- Sandpoint had already effectively implemented many of the traffic control tools and safety design mechanisms presented but lacked a solution at a vital access point because they hadn't considered a human presence, i.e. crossing guard, as an effective tool.
- Rathdrum had six crossing guards through a contract between the Lakeland School District and the City of Rathdrum – a model shared with others, and wasn't using the safety designs and tools being used in Sandpoint, but now have a nearby model.
- Menan had started a "Pacers"* program to promote student walking despite busing 100% of students due to safety concerns. This program was applicable to many of the schools served and was widely shared.
- Sandpoint was using low impact storm drainage techniques that were of interest in other communities, i.e. Aberdeen.
- Caldwell has effectively used pathways to access and connect school sites and other city assets or areas, but was slower to adopt roadway safety tools. Without those roadway tools the pathways are less useful because the network is incomplete. After learning more they are now applying those tools widely.
- Small towns can be very nimble. Mackay acted in three weeks to provide a simple low-cost walkway in the short term while working on identifying the best long-term solution.
- Many communities had more assets than they knew about, especially unknown sidewalks. Inventories, clean-up days and awareness campaigns give them a good start on a connected pedestrian system without spending for construction.

The Action Plans


Safe Routes to School Action Plan – Kamiah, Idaho

The Action Plans are all available in full on line at:
http://www.idahosmartgrowth.org/index.php/resources/
We encourage you to review them. They are four to six pages in length and are organized as follows:

Background – This section describes the community, its setting, conditions and issues.

Recommended Infrastructure Improvements – comprehensively details the specific improvements, such as paint markings, signage and construction projects, for student safety. Graphics are used to provide examples and show locations.

Policy Recommendations – City, school district and tribal policies and plans were reviewed. Findings of the review and recommended changes are shared.

Non-Infrastructure Recommendations – Actions that will aid in good decisions and encouragement activities that will increase the likelihood of students walking and biking are described.

Resources – tools, model ordinances, technical briefs and more can be found on line under Best Practices at: http://www.idahosmartgrowth.org/index.php/resources/

**"Pacers" is a walk at lunch program that imagines travel adventures to distant places via cumulative distance goals*