



Safe Routes to School in Action

Borough of Netcong, New Jersey

Background

The Borough of Netcong, located in Morris County New Jersey, is surrounded by several major highways and bisected by a NJ Transit commuting rail line. The town's boundaries are home to nearly 3200 residents and span no more than a square mile. Netcong Elementary School enrolls approximately 300 Pre-K through 8th grade students annually. The district is considered a walking district and does not provide bus service to students. The school district also instituted a bicycling ban in the 1980's that existed until recently.

To assess students' transportation methods to and from school, a school survey was conducted in 2006. Results demonstrated that between 20-30% of students walked while nearly 65% of students were driven (carpools or family cars). The community recognized that the amount of students traveling to and from school in vehicles caused congestion in front of the school as well as congestion along roads that run through the Borough, causing delays for other drivers. With the implementation of a new school wellness and nutrition policy, walking to school was identified as a way to not only encourage physical activity, but also provide a viable option for school travel and improve traffic congestion. The administration and PTA recognized a need for change, but knew that change could only come with infrastructure improvements. Many of the streets surrounding the school did not have sidewalks or had sidewalks in need of repair. Additionally, train tracks for a NYC commuter line that run behind the school provided another obstacle to children walking and biking to and from school.

In 2007, the municipality, in partnership with the Superintendent, School Board and PTA, applied for Safe Routes to School (SRTS) federal support and received \$150,000 that funded sidewalk improvements along Prospect Street near school, monthly Walk to School programs, and events that eventually led to the reversal of the school district's long-held ban on bicycling.

Details

Having been identified by the community as a key location for construction, the bulk of the SRTS grant funding was reserved for infrastructure changes along Prospect Street. A total of \$143,000 of SRTS funding was spent constructing sidewalks and the project was completed in the summer of 2008, just in time for the 2008-2009 school year.

The remaining \$7,000 was dedicated to fund events that encouraged the children to walk and bike to school. Results from the school-wide transportation survey conducted in 2006 indicated that 37% of the school population would choose to ride a bicycle to school if they were allowed. Recognizing this, an initial step in institutionalizing Netcong's SRTS program was to address the ban on bicycling to school. Meetings with

the Superintendent, School Board, New Jersey Department of Transportation, Northern NJ SafeKids, PTA, and Borough Administrator resulted in the creation of a revised policy to allow 4th through 8th graders to ride bicycles to school. The new policy allows older students to bike to school as long as they have a permission slip signed by a parent or guardian. The signed permission slips include a commitment to always wear a helmet, walk the bike while on school property, and to participate in a bike rodeo. The new bicycle policy was implemented and the bicycle ban was reversed on April 1, 2009. SafeKids held a bike rodeo, including a bicycle inspection and lessons on bicycle safety and helmet use, a few days after the new policy was enacted. With over 70 students participating, the response to bicycling in Netcong so far has been overwhelming. To accommodate all of the new bicyclists at Netcong Elementary School, bike racks purchased with SRTS grant funds are currently being installed.



**A student participates in a bike rodeo (left)
A school official locks up bikes at school prior to the installment of bike racks (right)**

Following the bike rodeo, a Walk to School Event was held as part of a week-long celebration of Earth Day. Despite some rain, the event proved to be a success. Three walking school buses were hosted by the Superintendent, the Mayor, and a police officer. School officials were overwhelmed with the excitement the event generated and as the walking school buses arrived at school, were left unsure about who had more fun, the children or the hosts!



Students show their walking spirit despite the wet weather

What's Next

A reversal of the bike ban has been a huge milestone for the Borough of Netcong, but there is still plenty of work to be done to ensure safe walking and bicycling to school. The State Department of Transportation will continue the work in Netcong by replacing a traffic circle with a 4-way intersection, including the raising and reconstruction of a bridge over the NJ transit rail lines. This infrastructure improvement project is located along a popular walk to school route and when completed, will encourage more children to walk while improving pedestrian safety for the many students who are already walking that route. The Borough is also seeking additional funding to construct a pedestrian bridge over the train tracks behind the school that will provide an additional safe crossing and help to prevent children from running across the tracks. Additional funding will allow Netcong to build upon their initial success by continuing to hold monthly walk and roll to school events year-round.

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