

Green Communities Active and Safe Routes to School Program

February 23, 2010

Webinar Transcript



Transports
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This webinar transcript covers the first half of a webinar held on Tuesday Feb. 23, 2010. The Bear Creek program, which was described in the second half of that webinar, is covered in a separate transcript.

Additional materials about Green Communities Canada's Active and Safe Routes to School Program can be found at <http://www.toolsofchange.com/en/case-studies/detail/635/>

Jay Kassirer: Jacky Kennedy is the director of Canada Walks for Green Communities Canada, has spent the past 11 years developing and implementing community-based walkability initiatives, including Ontario's Active and Safe Routes to School Program, the National School Travel Planning Project, the Canadian Walkability Roadshow, the 2007 World Record Walk, and the Walk21 Y-WALK Global Youth Forum. In October 2007, Green Communities Canada and the City of Toronto co-hosted the International Walk21 Conference, bringing over 300 international delegates to Canada.

Jacky's background is in project management at IBM, but her children motivated her to join the environmental movement, and we're pleased. She has really added a lot to walkability and cyclability in Canada, she walks the talk when it comes to active transportation, and enjoys cooking, good movies, and fashion. Please help me in welcoming Jacky Kennedy.

Jacky Kennedy: Thanks, Jay. Welcome everybody today. I'd like to start off by thanking Tools of Change, Jay, and Louise, as well as Transport Canada for the opportunity to participate in this webinar today. I have a lot of slides, so I'm going to try to go through them fairly quickly.

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Some of you would have seen parts of this presentation before, but we also have a lot of new people on the line, so I want to make sure that everybody is on the same page when we're talking about Active and Safe Routes to School and School Travel Planning in Canada. Here's what we're going to go through today: a little bit of brief history of the program in Canada, some information on School Travel Planning, I'm going to talk specifically about some

studies and some other exciting work that has been happening, so you've got some good case studies to see. There will be some pilot results, and then finally, we'll finish on Active and Safe Routes to School in the rural context.

As Jay mentioned, Canada Walks is the department that I manage under Green Communities Canada, and Active Safe Routes to School and School Travel Planning is what I'm going to talk about today. Some of you might also know us from Walkability Roadshows, Master Classes, and the Walk21 Conference

Active and Safe Routes to School is an international movement of organizations dedicated to creating safe community environments where families choose to walk or use other methods of active transportation to and from school. For us, it's ultimately about ensuring that children today have independent mobility; I think that's the crux of what we're talking about here. Along those lines, we have worked for many years with Dr. Catherine O'Brien and the Center for Sustainable Transportation in assisting them to create the Child and Youth Friendly Land Use and Transportation Planning Guidelines.

You can go to their website, kidsonthemove.ca and see all of the fantastic work that they've been doing, and we really try and incorporate their work into everything that we do with afterschool travel. The very first guideline in Transport and Land Use Planning is that the needs of Children and Youth should receive as much priority as the needs of people of other ages. Jay mentioned 11 years; I guess you'll have to update that bio because we're now moving into 14 years of doing this work in Canada, which is awfully long time.

The program started back in 1997 with pilot projects in Ontario and British Columbia, and has grown today to a national movement involving thousands of schools and hundreds of communities. After Ontario and B.C. were on board, then around '99, 2000, we brought on Nova Scotia, Alberta, Quebec, and Manitoba. Today, we all come together under the Active and Safe Routes to School Canadian Partnership to form that partnership and we have now added Saskatchewan and the Yukon. Over the next two years, we aim to have a program in every province and territory in Canada, so a lot of growth in Canada.

Interestingly enough, a lot of this work is still being done by the non-profit sector, which sets us apart from other places around the world. I'm just going to quickly talk about School Travel Planning so everybody is on the same page with that. Back in 2006, Green Communities, with funding from Transport Canada's Moving on Sustainable Transportation initiative, started an extensive research project to look at international best practice in School Travel Planning. The results of this research can be found on our website, and it led to the creation of an international best practice document, along with some recommendations for Canada.

We turned those recommendations into a funding application to the Public Health Agency of Canada, who, lucky for us, gave us the funding, and in 2007 to 2009 we initiated a pilot project to test our recommendations in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. That pilot officially wrapped up in March 2009, but then the Public Health Agency allowed us to have a one-year extension with some extra funding, and so we are not going until this March, 2010. We also received from funds from George Weston to help us with Phase III.

As a result of all of that work, we have been able to create a guide for school travel. We're referring to this as the model framework for Canada. It's a toolkit that consists of over 20 appendices, and everything you need to know to do School Travel Planning in your town, your city, your province. Right now, with the introduction of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the Yukon into the project, we put in an application to the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer. They had an initiative, a CLASP initiative, which stands for Coalitions Linking Action and Science for Prevention. We thought it was a bit of a long shot.

We teamed up with the University of Toronto, who have been working with us for the last couple of years to help us with the data collection and analysis and are creating what will end up being a fantastic database for this work in Canada, something that never existed before, along with Catherine O'Brien at Cape Breton University and incorporating not only the guidelines, but her work on sustainable happiness. So we were quite interested to see how well our proposal was received, and I'm happy to announce that we are being funded through the Partnership and the Public Health Agency of Canada for a project that will take place over the next two years disseminating School Travel Planning to every part of the country.

We've seen continual sustained growth in Canada, both at the local level and at the national level. If you were to sit down and write a business plan, this is what it would have looked like, so it's actually kind of perfect and we're very, very pleased with ourselves.

What is a School Travel Plan? Well, it's both a document and a process. It's really the process by which you deliver the Active and Safe Routes to School. Active and Safe Routes to School is a very fun series of activities to encourage and educate families on using active travel. But what it's lacked up until now is the policy piece that really pulls it all together, so the plan itself is a document.

Every school that goes through this process works on a School Travel Plan and ends up with a document, and it's also a process. Ideally, you want to have all of the pieces in place by June, which would be establishing a Municipal Steering Committee, selecting the schools, establishing the school-level committees, and working out a project plan for the entire project. You want to have that done by the end of June so that you can then start working on collecting your data, and starting the project at the beginning of the school year, September/October.

You're going to collect a lot of information. This is something that was lacking in Active and Safe Routes to School previously. There were surveys that were being done, but it wasn't a rigorous process and schools didn't have to do them; it was voluntary. But under School Travel Planning, we do student surveys, family surveys, school site visits and walkabouts, traffic, pedestrian, and cyclist counts so that we can determine the current travel patterns and identify the key issues at the schools, also, identify volunteers. We do this in September, and then we do it again at the end of the school year at the end of May so that you can go back and measure your final data against the baseline.

Then, all this information gets put into your School Travel Plan, so you're creating that plan right from the very beginning. Then, you move into your action planning, where you've got your information from the baseline and you can start deciding on what are the key issues, and how are we going to address them. This is done by the entire Stakeholder Committee working with the school. Then, you move into implementation. Sometimes, your action planning and your implementation can overlap, and you can end up getting

things done, like changing the paint on the road while you're actually still creating your actions.

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All of this information is continually fed into the School Travel Plan document so at the end of the year you have a comprehensive document for each school that details where they were at the beginning, what the issues are, what the actions are to deal with those issues, and then how you're going to continue to measure it. Then, in year two, you do the process again with those schools, you continue to collect data, and continue to check it against the plan. So it's a fairly comprehensive process, and I must say that the engineers and planners that we're working with really like this process because it mirrors a lot of the work that they do.

The main benefit of School Travel Planning is that active school travel becomes an integral part of municipal transportation planning and policy. Things like travel to school start to be included in official plans and transportation plans - because often they're not - and it also involves working in conjunction with the school district and having them think about other modes of transportation and not just school buses. It provides targets for implementation, which are really key. All relevant stakeholders have to get involved, which involves parents, students, school staff, municipal transportation engineers and planners, the police, public health, school districts, politicians, and local residents, and any other organizations that might have something to do locally with active school travel.

Cost is very key today. We are seeing shrinking budgets and huge deficits, increasing costs in fuel or fuel price fluctuations for school districts. By approaching school travel and active school travel in a comprehensive way, you can save everybody's time, there's no duplication of effort, and because you're collecting the data, you can see the results of your investment over time and you can see the savings that are being accrued. The other nice thing is that it does relate to policies at the national, regional, provincial, and local level around health, environment, and injury prevention, so it can all be measured and tied in with that.

I want to spend a couple minutes talking about a project from here in Ontario that has been quite successful and some you might have heard about already. A pilot project was spearheaded by Halton

Region Health Department back in 2008, and it was for one year. Jennifer Jenkins, who I think might be on the call today, was the public health nurse. She worked with eight schools and the Halton District School Board to pilot intensive Safe Routes to School programming. She formed a regional steering committee, and the final report with all of the recommendations is available on the web, and I'll show you that website in a moment.

The project was very well received by all of the stakeholders involved. So well received by the school board, in fact, that just recently they seconded Jennifer from Public Health to the Halton District School Board where she is working on a pilot project with 20 Halton District School Board Elementary Schools, and most recently, the Catholic School Board in Halton has joined the initiative and will have five schools involved in the project. This is the first time that we've seen a school district working in partnership with the other key stakeholders, standing up and saying, we really like this program and we're going to make an investment in active transportation.

What's happened so far is that the active transportation strategy has been created, they've assigned a budget, they've assigned the key person, which was Jennifer, they've definitely got senior management buy-in, there is an internal working group as well as an external steering committee, and you can learn more about this fantastic project at these two websites here, halton.ca/asrts and hdsb.ca, that stands for Halton District School Board.ca. Some of you might be familiar with one of their pilot schools, T.R. Robertson, which is a new elementary school in Milton, Ontario that received some fantastic media recently. They are dedicating themselves as being the first walking school in Canada, where they are encouraging that only parents will walk. We're following that one very closely.

I want to provide you as well with a study that was done recently. Green Communities is a partner with MetroLink, and MetroLink is an agency of the Government of Ontario that oversees the implementation of the regional transportation plan for the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area. The project that we're involved in is called Stepping it Up, and it involves taking our School Travel Plan model created by Green Communities, combining the smart commute component, which would reach out to the staff that work in a school, and seeing how this would work in Hamilton and the Region of Peel.

Last fall, MetroLink commissioned a household attitudinal study to better understand students' travel to school within the context of household transportation. About a thousand telephone interviews were conducted with parents and guardians of elementary-aged children, we're talking junior kindergarten to grade eight. They collected information on the children's usual mode of travel to and from school, they looked at parental perceptions around school travel, the awareness of school travel programs, and interest in active and sustainable ways to travel to school. The final results will soon be on the MetroLink's website, and you can also send an email directly to Jennifer Lay at MetroLink, who may be on the call today, her details are there.

Results from the study show that nearly 60 percent of parents felt that their children's school was close enough that they could reasonably walk or bike, and about 40 percent of those parents who said that their child is currently driven see the option of their child walking. In other words, they feel that it's convenient and appealing to walk, and 40 percent of the parents whose children are currently driven said that they would be very interested in considering a different mode of school travel. So that was all very positive. Within the Greater Toronto/Hamilton area one thing that came out of the study is although a lot of children are traveling to school by walking, more of them are actually using active transportation in the afternoon.

They notice that about one tenth of students are traveling differently on their way home from school than they are to school. And no surprised here, within one kilometer, three and four children are walking to and home from school, but that number drops off significantly the further away from the school that you live. Again, you can go to the MetroLink's school travel section to check out this website or contact Jennifer Lay if you want more details.

Now, I'm just quickly going to look at some of the early results from the first phase of our School Travel Plan Pilot Project. As you recall, this is the one that took place in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia.

These results were compiled for us by the University of Toronto. We're working with two faculties there, physical education and health, and the faculty of geography. The university is very pleased to be involved in this because they are doing a fantastic

project, a BEAT Project, Built Environment Active Transportation, and working with us on School Travel Planning, and other active school initiatives really is a fantastic way for them to just add to their knowledge.

Across the four provinces, as we saw in the MetroLink study, we have 37 percent of children using active travel to get to school in the morning, but that number goes up to 44 percent in the afternoon. The top three reasons for driving were: the weather, 21 percent; convenience and time pressures, 18 percent; and parents already enroute somewhere else, 17 percent. Sixty-seven percent of parents felt that their neighborhood was safe for children to use active transportation to or from school. Just over 13 percent in the follow-up survey that we did, the family survey, indicated that they had changed their driving to or from school as a result of being involved in the project.

But because we had to do the results earlier than anticipated because of our funding deadline, we also did a Hands-up classroom survey, which was done by every student that was involved. We noticed a 2.1 percent increase in active school travel between March 2008 and March 2009, so we weren't disappointed. The most effective activities according to the family survey were safety education, 24 percent; special events, 24 percent; and improvements to the built environment, 19 percent.

And to the question, "I would let my child walk to school if ...", the response were:

- Walking: if they were not alone, about 40 percent, and if traffic dangers were reduced, 22 percent
- Cycling, 33 percent not alone, and 25 percent if reduced traffic dangers.

That showed to us that there is room there for things like walk to school buses, etc.

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Implementing the program, there are certain steps that you need to go through, particularly with School Travel Planning. You really have to have all the right stakeholders at the table, and here's who they are. Within the school, you need to have a supportive principal, parent council, teachers, and you need to have some

things that make it fun for the kids to get them engaged, so if you could take it into the classroom, it's really, really good, and telling those good news stories is also very good. We've already talked a lot about collecting the data, and typically the data that's collected are the neighborhood walkabouts, surveys, and traffic counts, and doing them periodically and checking against your baseline.

In a perfect world, this kind of infrastructure is what you would want to see in and around school areas and the communities, and we must never forget that we're doing this for the health and happiness of our children. There are many activities involved as we've mentioned in Active and Safe Routes to School, International Walk to School Day, walking challenges like walking once a week, the I-WALK Club, Walking School Buses, etc., and you can take a look at the international work that's happening on the iwalktoschool.org website as well, so you'll see what's happening around the world and how all these activities are done at an international level.

Morton Way Public School in Brampton is a very, very good example of how a school would take all of these pieces and make it work. As a result of their program, which has been going on for while, they won an international Walk to School Award and they've got 80 percent or more of their students walking and rolling to school most days.

A lot of people say that you can't do this program in a rural context, but that's actually not true. We have several examples, and I'm very quickly going to share with you an example from a School Travel Plan Pilot Project in Nova Scotia.

Shatford Memorial Elementary School is in Hubbards, which is on the border of Halifax Regional Municipality. As you can see, it's a very small town and the school itself only has 78 students. One of the main issues they had was speed. The road in front of the school is posted at 50 kilometers an hour, but cars were traveling a lot faster because it's actually near a cutoff to a major highway that takes you into downtown Halifax. There are no sidewalks, and the shoulders on the road were very poor. The crosswalk is outdated, cars aren't stopping, and there is a trail nearby, but there was poor access.

I'm going to focus on the trail because in Canada, one of the things that we do really well is trails. We are experts when it comes to

trails for recreational walking and cycling, but more and more, especially in rural communities, we're seeing how trails can be used to link to everyday walking places like schools. So they first had to determine who owned the connector trail, the land where they wanted to build their connector trail, and it turned out it was Halifax Regional Municipality, and they approved it – there's a trail being built here.

They had to do some fundraising, and they worked with the home and school and with local councilors, HRM, the province, as well as many other sources to raise the funds for this. One of the key things that they did was hold a summit meeting with stakeholders, and that really brought everybody together to see that there was a need for this, and that everyone was working to do this for the children. I'm very, very happy to say that the official opening of this trail will be in fall 2010.

Q: When you say children driven, are you meaning by a parent as opposed to coming by a school bus, or does that include school bus as well?

Jacky Kennedy: Was that when we were talking about the results? Because the passive travel was all lumped together as being driven, coming on a school bus, coming on transit, but I think on the MetroLink survey results, driven was actually by car, so I hope that that answers that question.

Q: There's a question about a rural area with a lot of highways - how you handle that.

Jacky Kennedy: Well, as we've just seen in the example from Shatfort, this road that's here, this road here, actually connects to a main highway. They're very, very close to the main highway, and even though this is posted at 50 kilometers an hour, the vehicles go much faster because half of them think they're still on the highway. This crosswalk that's here is very ineffective, and I think, I believe, it's going to be changed. There's no sidewalk and a shoulder; it's really terrible. What they wanted to do was to get these children off of this road and onto a trail that runs parallel with this road, and it runs pretty much where the road does, but there was no connector to it, so that is what they focused on.

Where they've also done this is up in Halliburton here in Ontario where they worked with a local active transportation committee with representatives from the health department and the local

municipality and other active people from the village, and they created a similar situation to what we have here. They also created a trail. There was a trail there, but it wasn't really formalized and there were some dangerous spots, so they worked on doing that. Collingwood has also done. There are lots of examples where we have utilized trails. It gets tricky because who owns these roads in rural areas?

You can get into multiple ownership, so you might have the province owning the road, but the road coming off of it would be owned by the local municipality. You might also have regional roads as well in there, so you have to make sure that you bring all of the right stakeholders to the table, so whoever is responsible for this road, and any roads in your community, has to be at the table so they can be part of coming up with the solution.

Q: That's great. There is also a question about the setting around the school and how it needs to be improved. There's a question from Calgary where there are lots of trails, but they're considered dangerous for students to walk through alone. School starts early, when it's dark out, so any strategies to overcome those issues?

Jacky Kennedy: I would say that it might be interesting to do some walking school buses along some of those trails, but first you need to work with the local trail organization and the local municipality to look at what the safety issues are. A lot of trails aren't cleared in winter, so they may not be good for walking in winter, but we have seen some communities that have had success with getting trails to local destinations cleared in winter. I think they've done some of this up in Collingwood. Paving trails, I know up in the region of Waterloo there was a trail that was being used by a lot of people to get to the local transportation hub, but it was pretty much dirt and not maintained in the winter. When this was brought to their attention, it was actually paved and is now cleared in the winter. So I think if you bring the right people together and you talk about these issues, you can come up with some workable solutions. In Collingwood, what they did with their trails because parents still didn't feel happy with having their children walk on a trail where nobody could see them, was come up with some pretty amazing walking school buses.

Q: Who assumes the cost, the school, public health, or the municipality?

Jacky Kennedy: Everybody. It depends who is responsible for what it is you're talking about. If you want to have sidewalks built in your residential community, that is the responsibility of the local municipality, so that is where the funding would have to come from. If you're looking at infrastructure changes that are going to involve cost, you need to make sure that you have political representation on your side because if you're going to go to municipal council with a suggestion to build some sidewalk on some streets, that money is going to have to come out of that municipalities budget. If you have a councilor on site who understands it and can go to bat for it, you're more likely going to get it.

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Anything that's taking place on the School Board property would be the responsibility of the School Board, so parking and those kinds of things – and sometimes it's a mix between the school district and the municipality, the municipality may have responsibility for the local roads, but they may not have responsibility for the arterial roads. There may be a regional level of government as well, so this is why it's so important at the beginning of this process to bring out all of the right stakeholders.

You really need to understand your community and who needs to be at the table because this is a shared responsibility, the same way as we share the responsibility of our getting people to the GO station for their commute and all of those things. It's the same process. It's a transportation demand management process is really what it is.

Q: When asked to meet to discuss Active and Safe Routes to School, our School Board Administration stated that they are not in any way interested in discussing, as they are very concerned about liability. Any ideas?

Jacky Kennedy: This comes up a lot, liability. There are two things to say to this. First of all, the School Travel Plan process, if it's followed properly, brings together all of the stakeholders, and one of the things that we recommend in our process is that you put in an application to your school district to ask their permission to do this project to bring them to the table. We're having a lot of success in getting those approved here in Ontario and in other parts of the

country. That way, you have an opportunity to explain to them what the process is about and to show them some of the tools.

Because we bring together all of the stakeholders, no one is pointing fingers and saying, well, you're responsible for this and you're responsible for that. You're coming at it as a team effort, and what you're essentially doing is you're ensuring that the best possible processes and methods are being put in place to make sure that all children can travel, have the opportunity to travel actively to school if they wish, or as many as possible. We know that not all of them can, especially in rural areas. But through the School Travel Plan process, there are also efficiencies to school busing, so we have situations where children have a funded place on a school bus, but parents are driving their children to school because they think that the bus isn't safe.

A School Travel Plan process looks at all of this and helps a school board to better understand what the issues are around how kids travel to and from school, and how things can be improved, not only to save them money, but to make it better for all of the students. Because liability is a bit of a tough issue, we did hire a risk management lawyer a few years ago and there are documents on our website that he produced for us. We're about to hire him again to take another look at this issue for us in the context of School Travel Planning.

Once we've had an opportunity to update that document and address some of these issues with him, we're going to host a national webinar through our School Travel Plan initiative on the issue of liability and Active and Safe Routes to School. It will be focused on Canada, and I'm not suggesting that we're going to be able to produce all the answers. I think though liability is somewhat of a perception, I think sometimes it's used as an excuse not to change anything. I might get told off for saying that, but sometimes I have seen that.

It is a serious issue, it does need to be addressed, and the best way to address it is through the School Travel Plan process because you make sure that all children are traveling to school safely and efficiently, and because you have all the stakeholders there, then all of these issues can be discussed and worked out as a team with the benefit being that we want safe, healthy, active children who get to the classroom ready to learn.

Q: We're going to take one more question now, and then we will save the rest until the end of the webinar. She may get a chance to answer them then, and if not, she'll answer them by email and we'll send the answers out to all of you. Do you have any more strategies to propose for encouraging School Boards that are responsible for school transport to be more inclined to encourage people to walk rather than take the bus?

Jacky Kennedy: Well, I think just trying to get as much information in front of them as possible about why they should be involved in active school travel. I think the cost is a big one when we saw the spike in gasoline prices over the last couple of years, and we heard stories about the State of California was going to stop busing students because it was just becoming way too expensive. Here in Ontario, we saw an additional \$18 million had to be found to cover that fuel spike. You can demonstrate to your school districts that they can actually save money on their school budgets and that they could also achieve other efficiencies.

Here, a lot of them are working on climate change initiatives through their Ministries of Education provincially, and then down to the big school districts. It's all very well to come up with this fantastic climate change policy, but if you're only looking at the school envelope and not what happens outside the school, then you're missing a whole segment of it. There are several ways of doing that. We are trying, through this project, to come up with a document, which we're hoping to release very soon, and it will be specifically for Ontario, but it's already been updated for Manitoba, and I think Nova Scotia's looking at it too, to take a look at these costs and actually put it down on paper and do a little bit of a study and a little bit of research.

Thank you everybody.



Landmark Designation

The program described in this case study was designated in 2009.

Designation as a Landmark (best practice) case study through our peer selection process recognizes programs and social marketing approaches considered to be among the most successful in the world. They are nominated both by our peer-selection panels and by Tools of Change staff, and are then scored by the selection panels based on impact, innovation, replicability and adaptability.

The panel that designated this program consisted of:

- Danny Albert, University of Ottawa's Parking and Sustainable Transportation Department
- Daniel Coldrey, Transport Canada
- Mark Dessauer, Active Living by Design
- Catherine Habel, Metrolinx
- Jacky Kennedy, Green Communities Canada
- Jessica Mankowski, Federation of Canadian Municipalities
- Gary McFadden, National Center for Biking and Walking
- Lorenzo Mele, Town of Markham
- Chuck Wilsker, U.S. Telework Coalition
- Phil Winters, University of South Florida
- JoAnn Woodhall, Translink