



Active Living Resource Center City Safe Routes to School Program

Post Workshop Report and Follow-up

Workshop Location
Birmingham, Alabama

Focus School
Ensley Head Start building

Workshop Date
**Tuesday, November 7,
2006**

Workshop Time
6 pm - 8 pm

Local Coordinators
**Tom Maxwell, Regional
Planning Commission of
Greater Birmingham**

**Paula Stanton, JCCEO – the
Community Action Agency of
Birmingham**

Background

A City Safe Routes to School community meeting was held at JCCEO's Head Start St. Joseph's Center on November 7, 2006. This was an introductory meeting designed to introduce the concepts of Safe Routes to School and the benefits of having a walkable neighborhood to Head Start parents, Ensley Neighborhood residents and other interested Birmingham-ites.

Tom Maxwell and Paula Stanton (JCCEO) served as the local coordinators for this workshop. The Safe Routes to School presentation was made by Mark

Plotz, ALRC/NCBW Program Manager. Sharon Roerty, Director of the Active Living Resource Center facilitated audience member introductions, responded to questions from the audience, helped catalog local barriers to walkability, and challenged participants to identify solutions to those barriers.

The presentation given was introductory, covering the following topics:

- ✓ Common barriers to walkability (with a specific emphasis on schools and children's mobility).
- ✓ Simple solutions that have worked in similar communities.
- ✓ Public policy rationale for improving walking conditions.
- ✓ Recommendations on how to get started.

Following the presentation the workshop participants were asked to identify the problems and solutions that they thought would help make the walking environment to and from the schools serving the children of the Ensley neighborhood and the neighborhood in general safer, and more desirable. (The group did not discuss bicycling to school.) The ideas from that discussion are provided below.

Attendees

It is estimated that nearly 30 people attended the workshop. Attendees included: several parents from the neighborhood who have children attending St. Joseph's Center, three Birmingham Community Crime Prevention officers, Birmingham JCCEO/Head Start personnel, a City of Birmingham representative, public health specialists from University of Alabama-Birmingham, and two officials from the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) including Alabama's Safe Routes to School coordinator.



The purpose of the SRTS workshop is in-part to provide information and education on SRTS programs and initiatives. The other part is to help jump start a local program – to get a commitment from a group of concerned local people who are willing to form a local task force or committee to work thorough a series of steps to make the walking environment around the school and the routes leading to the school safer and better for the students; and to invite and engage others in the community to work with them. In short to give life to the thoughts and ideas that were shared at the workshop.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

- ✓ Neighborhood sidewalks are in poor condition. Cracks, heaves, and missing sidewalk sections make walking at night hazardous.
- ✓ Poor street lighting worsens the above problems.
- ✓ Residents wishing to walk for exercise choose not to walk on the sidewalks. Instead, they use the parks because they are safer (traffic, crime, stray dogs).
- ✓ Stray dogs in neighborhood are a threat.
- ✓ One parent said that she does not allow her children to play in her neighborhood. She lives on Warrior Road (a four lane city street, speed limit 35 mph) and feels that there is too much traffic, moving too fast for her children to safely play. She said the road is too long and straight and that makes it easy for cars to speed. (Sidewalks are also missing along parts of that street.)
- ✓ One child who took part in the workshop noted that he is only allowed to ride his bike in his driveway and on the street immediately in front of his house (where his mother can see him). His mother is concerned about speeding traffic and reckless drivers.
- ✓ Kids are using alley ways to get to school.
- ✓ One resident cited the nearby Interstate 59/20 interchange with Avenue I and Warrior Road (Exit 119B) as a significant barrier to walking. Sidewalks and crosswalks are absent and/or inconsistently provided. Instead, she drives because she feels it is safer than walking.
- ✓ Several residents said they don't walk because it is too dangerous. Traffic, crime, and stray dogs were the top concerns cited.
- ✓ Concern was expressed over the aesthetics of the new high school in Ensley. One participant offered that it looks like a prison. The new school is built and operating but there are no sidewalks, crosswalks or stop signs around it.

SOLUTIONS

- ✓ The new high school will soon be getting sidewalks. The contract is now 'out to bid' according to Victor Blackledge, Urban Design Administrator for the City of Birmingham..
- ✓ Unresolved is the lack of trees and lack of traffic control at the site of the new school. Trees were not allowed along the street and the (future) sidewalk because of ALDOT's 'clear zone policy.'
- ✓ Concern was also expressed over the process for public comment on projects like the new high school. Few who attended this community meeting were aware there was an opportunity to comment on the new school before it was built.
- ✓ The Village Creek Greenway will pass through Ensley, connecting it to other parts of Birmingham. Dick Woodruff and a representative of the Village Creek Society that is promoting the greenway was present. He announced his commitment to create connections between the greenway and neighborhoods, schools, and parks.

Note: This community meeting was structured to fit a compact format so that it could capture the parents picking up the children after the Head Start Program. The shortened format was useful in terms of raising awareness and identifying community concerns but it did not allow enough time to structure an approach to the concerns or organize a task force. However, the notes will be shared with people like Joanie Thompson, Paula Stanton and Bill Luckerson (ALDOT's SRTS coordinator who also attended the meeting) as well as interested others with an expectation, based on the level of concern and interest that was expressed at the meeting, that there will be community follow-up.



Above: The new high school in the Ensley neighborhood. Pedestrian access around the school was identified as an issue during the workshop.



Middle: A pedestrian overpass provides access across the adjacent Interstate. The Interstate divides this historic neighborhood.

Below: A nearby park used by many people who attended the workshop. Improved lighting was identified as a priority need.





Initial Commitments

Dr. Marquita Davis, Deputy Director Child Development Services at JCCEO, promised to repair potholes in the facility's parking lot. (This was in response to a Head Start parent's concern.)

All attendees pledged to 'make noise' in order to get the City's greenway completed. (The plan has been approved and money has been allocated to the project. Ground has yet to be broken.) Several attendees indicated a willingness to attend Wednesday's meeting at Wenonah/Lawson Community College.

Joanice Thompson, an Ensley resident, took part in the meeting. In addition to being a resident she is also the Community Outreach Liaison at the University of Alabama-Birmingham as well as coordinator for Healthy Birmingham (a City of Birmingham public health initiative started by Mayor Bernard Kincaid). Joanice is an avid walker and she stated her commitment to making the Ensley Neighborhood safer and better for walking for all of Ensley residents. Ms. Thompson can be contacted at 205.996.2989 or jthompson@mail.dopm.uab.edu. At the end of the meeting we took a group photo of some of the meeting attendees. A copy was provided to Ms. Thompson.

Workshop Facilitators

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Internet Resources

The Active Living Resource Center supports a web site that includes valuable SRTS information on it <http://www.activelivingresources.org>