

SRTS CASE STUDY: Fairhope, Alabama

Monthly walk-to-school events are habit-forming

SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School



CASE STUDY

Introduction

In Fairhope, AL, regular walk-to-school events are scheduled to help create a sustainable program that will change behaviors and enhance the community's walkability.

Three schools in Fairhope serve elementary-age children: Fairhope K-1 Center, Fairhope Elementary School for second and third graders and Fairhope Intermediate School for fourth and fifth graders. Each school has approximately 500 students.

The first step toward raising community awareness about walking occurred when the City of Fairhope Police Department and Planning Department together organized “Walk Your Child to School Day” in October 2008 to promote safety, physical activity, and concern for the environment. As parents and caregivers walked with their children, they taught children the proper way to cross the street and other pedestrian safety rules, and they also observed first-hand potential safety issues. Many parents and students showed up to walk to school despite the rainy weather.

During this Walk-to-School event, the Walkable Communities Committee of Smart Coast, an area non-profit that raises awareness about sustainable growth in the coastal Alabama counties, surveyed participants about whether they would be interested in more frequent walk to school events. Out of 80 surveys that were distributed, 60 respondents said they wanted to participate in a monthly event. Smart Coast talked with principals from all 3 schools who agreed to promote the monthly walk. Themes were established with a fun focus and soon a new culture of walking to school was being re-established.

One portion of the survey asked respondents about barriers to walking.

“You’ve really got to identify what the parent fears are,” says Charlene Lee, Program Director of Smart Coast.

The resulting program evolved into two parts, Lee says: The first issue was to address safety by building sidewalks, and the second issue was to address behaviors.



Activities

In 2008, the Baldwin County Commission was awarded a \$182,840 Safe Routes to School infrastructure grant from the Alabama Department of Transportation to construct a 5-foot wide concrete sidewalk 4,479 feet long along Boothe Road between Spring Run Drive and Twin Beech Road. The sidewalk will provide a way for students to walk to Fairhope Middle School and the high school.

Smart Coast has partnered with the Baldwin County School System and the Fairhope City Planning Commission to hold weekly First Friday Fun Walks to School to area elementary schools. They identified three park-and-walk locations located within a half mile of the schools and provided prizes to encourage participation. Parents and students met at 7:15 a.m. at Big Lots, First Baptist Church and the Civic Center and walked to Fairhope Elementary, Fairhope Intermediate and Fairhope K-1 Center. The walks have incorporated special guest walkers and “treat” coupons.

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Milestones

Each month, more than 160 students and parents from Fairhope K-1, Fairhope Elementary, and Fairhope Intermediate School participated in the walk-to-school events.

“We’re seeing our numbers begin to rise,” Lee says. “It is starting to rebuild the thought process of realizing a culture of walkability. In our last 2 walks, we had over 200 students along with many parents and grandparents joining in the walks.”

A survey showed that all of the 83 people who responded would like for the walks to continue next year. Lee hopes that the program can be used as a model for other communities.

“Our surveys showed parents overwhelmingly supported this ‘walking school bus’ notion on a monthly basis,” continues Lee. “It’s about living in a more healthy, connected fashion—making a choice to park the car and get out with your community to interact. Fairhope is fortunate to have many schools that indeed are walkable—we want to show the community what a treasure that is. Smart Coast’s Walkable Communities Committee is looking into what will make walking to school a regular activity again—and safe routes and a sense of fun are key.”

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