

**SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOLS MASTER PLAN
FOR SITKA SCHOOLS**

SITKA, ALASKA

INTRODUCTION

Sitka is a community of 9,000 residents nestled between mountains and the sea on Baranof Island in Southeast Alaska. With no roads on or off the island, just 14 miles of coastal highway, and where the highest posted speed limit is 45 miles per hour, Sitka is a community well suited for non-motorized transportation. Having recently been recognized as a Bicycle-Friendly community by the League of American Bicyclists, we are well on our way to realizing our goal of becoming a model community for safe, healthy, alternative transportation. The Safe Routes to School Program provides further support for this goal.

The Sitka Safe Routes to School Master Plan first found support as a result of the 2nd Annual Sitka Community Health Summit, held in April 2008. Participants at the summit selected community walkability as a focus issue, and a walkability committee was created. The committee initiated the local Safe Routes To Schools planning process, and was successful in obtaining a SRTS planning grant. With planning organized by a project coordinator, members of several community organizations including the Southeast Regional Health Consortium, Sitka Community Hospital, Sitka School District, City and Borough of Sitka, Sitka School District and community members came together to develop this plan.

PURPOSE

Members of the planning committee came together due to a shared commitment to improving the quality of life of our community's children. Through the Safe Routes to School Program, we endeavor to:

Improve the Health and Safety of Children

- Increase the number of children walking and biking to participating schools by 15-20% within two years.
- Celebrate and promote healthy children and activities

Improve Safety to and from School

- Provide children with comprehensive pedestrian and bicycle education
- Provide targeted enforcement of safety laws around schools
- Remove or improve physical obstacles that impact safety in the built environment

THE PROGRAM

The Sitka Master Plan is modeled on the "Safe Routes to Schools" program, an international program encouraging safer walking and biking routes to school and providing safety and educational training to students about walking and biking. This program utilizes the "5E's". They are:

- Engineering – Identify needed operational and physical improvements to the infrastructure surrounding schools to help reduce speed and potential conflicts with motor vehicle traffic, establish safer crossings, walkways, trails and bikeways
- Education – Teach children bicycle and walking safety, driver safety campaigns
- Enforcement – Ensure traffic laws are obeyed with (i.e., speed enforcement, crossing guard programs)
- Encouragement – Using special events and activities to help promote walking and bicycling
- Evaluation – Monitoring and documenting outcomes and trends to document effectiveness

THE PARTNERS

Several individuals representing Sitka’s education, law enforcement, health, and community organizations, came together to develop this plan. Planning Committee members include:

Grace Brooks <i>Steps to a Healthier Southeast Alaska</i> <i>Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium</i>	Chris Bryner <i>Planning Coordinator</i>
Penny Lehman <i>Director of Public Health,</i> <i>Sitka Health Center</i>	Lynne McGowen <i>Parks and Recreation Manager,</i> <i>City and Borough of Sitka</i>
Vivian Mork <i>Injury Prevention Specialist</i> <i>Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium</i>	Barb Morse <i>Executive Director</i> <i>Southeast Alaska Independent Living</i>
Doug Osborne <i>Health Promotion</i> <i>Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium</i>	Matthew Turner <i>Advancing Our Communities</i> <i>Sitka Bicycle Friendly Coalition</i>

In addition to the involvement of the above committee members, input was solicited through the following means:

- Public Information Meetings
- Interviews of Key Stakeholders, including school principals, Parent Advisory Committees, city departments (Tree and Landscape, Public Works), School Superintendent, and community organizations.
- Parent Surveys and Student Tallies
- Congruence with current non-motorized plan objectives and bicycle-friendly initiatives, including Sitka Trails Master Plan.

THE SCHOOLS

Baranof Elementary School serves approximately 200 students grades K-1. The school is located close to downtown and borders one of two of Sitka's major arterial roads. Baranof students are young, and the vast majority of students arrive either by bus or with their parents. Virtually no students bike to school, and parents and school officials have expressed concern regarding children biking at this age. As a result, a focus on walking related issues and efforts is the focus here. Crossing Guard service is provided during morning arrival and at 1st grade dismissal. Currently, no service is provided during Kindergarten dismissal.

Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School serves over 400 students grades 2-5. The school is located in a residential neighborhood, with one major street crossing that nearly all students must cross en route. Students both walk and bike to KGH at a rate of approximately 15-20% during the early fall and spring months. Formal education efforts will be focused here.

Blatchely Middle School serves approximately 300 students grades 6-8. BMS is located on a very busy arterial road, and students must cross regularly. Approximately 15% of students walk or bike to school, with a majority of students traveling by bus. BMS presented the most challenging arrival and dismissal issues, with students having to cross in front of school busses to access parking and crosswalks. School personnel help facilitate arrival and dismissal due to issues with bus and motor vehicle congestion and the school's location on a busy roadway.

NOTE: Currently, there is no bus service travel policy regarding student eligibility. All students may request service regardless of the distance of their commute.

KEY ISSUES

The issues identified by planning committee members through observation, audit, tally, and public input have been divided into four categories:

- District / community-wide issues.
- Baranof Elementary School Zone and radius.
- Keet Gooshi Heen School Zone and radius.
- Blatchley Middle School zone and radius.

District / Community-wide Issues

Across the district, walking and biking rates fall short of community expectations.

Several factors contribute to the district-wide rate of 15% including:

- Each school serves 100% of students within the grade level. Therefore, all students have one school option for their grade, regardless of distance. This means that a number of students live outside of reasonable walking / biking distances.

- Our community lacks a comprehensive and consistent approach to educating students, parents, and teachers about the benefits and safe practices related to walking and biking.
- Like most Alaskan communities, weather and the lack of daylight in the winter months discourages walking and biking, and winter road conditions are not as safe as they could be due to the lack of snow removal on school routes.

Baranof Elementary School

- In order for many students to travel to and from school, they must cross Sawmill Creek Road, one of Sitka's two arterial roadways with heavy traffic. Currently, crosswalks exist at each end of the school along the roadway, though both lack adequate signage, lighting, and sidewalk access. (PHOTO BES1)
- Within the 1 mile walking radius of the school, an additional crossing near a major subdivision is deemed unsafe by many parents in the community.
- Crossing Guard coverage has been intermittent, and currently does not cover Kindergarten dismissal.
- Many of the residential streets within the 1 mile walking radius lack sidewalks, forcing children to walk in the street. Focus is on Baranof Street, a feeder street that borders the school and will connect to cross trail. (PHOTO BES2)



Photo BES1, *left* shows the condition of the main crosswalk across Sawmill Creek Road, one of Sitka's major roadways. BES2, *above* depicts the lack of sidewalks leading to / from area neighborhoods to the crossing in BES1.

Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School

- Students walking or biking to Keet Gooshi Heen will have to cross or travel along Edgcumbe Drive, a feeder street with inadequate bicycle lanes and traffic calming. (PHOTOS KGH1, KGH2, KGH3)
- A well traveled alternate route to Edgcumbe Drive for students traveling from the south lacks sidewalks. (PHOTO KGH4)
- Current bicycle parking is uncovered, and bike racks are currently the old “tire bender” style.



Photos KGH 1-3 show two potentially unsafe crossings of Mt. Edgcumbe Drive on the route to Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School. No sidewalks connect from the intersection in Photos KGH 2&3, *above left and bottom right*, to a well-traveled route along ball fields to the school shown in KGH4, *bottom left*. The school is in the background.

Blatchley Middle School

- Bus idling leads to the accumulation of exhaust fumes at school entrance, and on side of building with air-intake vents for classrooms.
- Bus idling and car pick-up / drop-off blocks pedestrian access to school entrance and presents issues including potentially unsafe driveway crossing, and parking lot access.
- Students must cross Halibut Point Road, one of two busy arterial roads in Sitka. Current traffic calming and signage is deemed inadequate. (PHOTO BMS2)



Photo BMS1, *above left*, depicts a typical dismissal at Blatchley Middle School. Note the lack of access to the walkway due to bus parking. Photo BMS2, *above right*, shows the crossing students make across Sitka's busiest roadway.

THE SOLUTIONS

Solutions have been identified by type (Four E's) and by location using the following key: District-wide (DW), Baranof Elementary School (BES), Keet Gooshi Heen elementary School (KGH), and Blatchley Middle School (BMS). In some cases, more than one location is designated for items whose impact overlaps.

ENGINEERING

Baranof Elementary School

- BES1 Pedestrian activated crossing signal (Hawk) at Indian River Road / SMC (State DOT will advise on scope schedule budget)
- BES2 Crosswalk repainting on SMC at Baranof St. and Monastery St. (State DOT will advise on scope schedule budget)
- BES3 Sidewalks on Baranof St. from Gavan Hill Trailhead to Lincoln Street. Currently no sidewalks from trailhead to SMC and partial from SMC to Lincoln.
- BES4 "U" shape bicycle rack to accommodate 20 bicycles (10 "U"s)

Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School

- KGH1 Edgecumbe Drive Road Diet. Narrow the driving lanes (traffic calming) and add bike paths with stripping changes. Include international bike lane directional symbols for bike lanes.
- KGH2 Sidewalks from 5-way intersection of Edgecumbe / Kimsham, along Kimsham to Furuhelm to KGH.
- KGH3 Stop sign at Edgecumbe Drive and Kashevaroff, creating 4-way stop.
- KGH4 In-roadway pedestrian crossing sign at Edgecumbe Drive and Kashevaroff. Removable for winter snow removal.
- KGH5 "U" shape bicycle rack to accommodate a total of 20 bicycles (10 "U"s) (Covered area is part of an Eagle Scout Project)
- KGH6 Pedestrian activated crossing signal (Hawk) at Kashevaroff and HPR (State DOT will advise on scope, schedule, budget)

Blatchley Middle School

- BMS1 BMS entrance with raised crosswalk connected to median strip. Some landscaping suggested of the median strip as well as a potential re-arrangement of parking. The raised crosswalk will also serve as a “no stopping” zone, providing safe access to the median strip between busses.
- BMS2 Sidewalk curb cuts to allow for cross-HPR pedestrian access. (State DOT will advise on scope schedule budget)
- BMS3 Three “U” shape bicycle racks to accommodate a total of 60 bicycles (30 “U”s)
- BMS4 Develop alternative trail route from adjacent neighborhood to BMS, moving student traffic away from busy roadway (behind BMS ballfield)

District-wide

- DW1 Update school signs to new standard (new reflective material)
- DW2 School signs for cross trail (Baranof and Keet)

EDUCATION

Presently, education efforts happen in a variety of disconnected formats. Efforts include an annual Bicycle Rodeo and grades K-1 participate in a school sponsored “Safety City” curriculum which teaches children about road safety. Additional safety and health promotion programs happen from time to time, often through the efforts of individual teachers, community members and organizations such as SEARHC’s injury prevention and health promotion departments. Our goal is to develop a comprehensive and consistent approach to training and educating students and parents about the benefits of walking and biking to school, as well as the skills needed to do so safely. In order to accomplish this, we propose to:

- ED1 Provide every 5th grader with the League of American Bicyclists’ Kids II training (approximately 100 children) per year. Include 6th grade for Year one. Sitka currently has four League certified instructors available to provide training.
- ED2 Develop and implement pedestrian safety training activities for grades K-5, to be held twice per year.
- ED3 Develop and implement parent / community member education regarding safe walking and biking with children, to be held twice per year.
- ED4 Provide eight teacher mini-grants to encourage new education initiatives,

including curriculum development, training, and encouragement activities.

- ED5 Work with school programs to ensure that the “Safety City” curriculum includes pedestrian and bicycle safety best practices.
- ED6 Provide eight bicycle and walking safety and training articles for school-published monthly newsletters.

ENFORCEMENT

The Sitka Police Department has been an active partner in bicycle and pedestrian safety efforts. SPD has participated in education efforts, helmet and bike light giveaways, and the creation and enforcement of bicycle laws. To further enforcement efforts we propose to:

- ENF1 Provide enforcement campaigns at each school, twice a year, that will include speed trailers, increased police presence, bicycle safety checks, public awareness of safety laws, and police participation in existing education efforts.
- ENF2 Encourage each school to develop “no idling” policies for busses and motor vehicles transporting students to and from school. The issue is most prominent at Blatchley Middle School due to the presence of classroom air intake vents adjacent to the bus loading zone.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Several opportunities exists to provide encouragement to children and their families to increase walking and biking to school. Many are free or low cost, and encouragement activities represent the majority of our planned projects. They include:

- ENC1 Develop Safe Routes maps for each school.
- ENC2 Develop walking and biking school bus programs at Baranof and Keet Gooshi Heen
- ENC3 Develop before and after school opportunities for walking at Baranof, Keet, and Blatchley schools (Morning Mile).
- ENC4 Develop fall and spring semester promotional campaigns that include incentives for walking and biking to school, public awareness and education, participation in national and international campaigns (IWalk, Bike Awareness Month, etc.), and recognition / awards for school walking and bicycling advocates.
- ENC5 Teacher mini-grants will also be used to develop teacher / staff led encouragement activities.

EVALUATION

Our primary evaluation goals are to assess regular participation and perceptions regarding safety. We will conduct bi-annual surveys of students and parents to monitor these goals. In addition, we will maintain data regarding participation in special events and programs, numbers of students trained through education programs, and other observable data such as bicycle light and helmet use. Metrics include:

- EV1 Pre and post percentage of students that walk or bike to school
- EV2 Parents' pre and post perceptions regarding school route safety and programs
- EV3 Student participation rates in regular programs (walking school bus, Wednesday walkers, etc.)
- EV4 Number of students trained in formal education activities (Kids II curriculum, other training and education)
- EV5 Number of student participants during biannual district-wide events.

PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

The Sitka Plan implementation will be overseen by a Planning Coordinator under advisement from the Sitka Safe Routes to School Advisory Committee, made up of area partners. The Coordinator will be a half-time contracted employee as defined by city regulations, and reports to the Director of Parks and Recreation. The job requirements of the position are as follows:

Overall Plan Implementation

The Planning Coordinator will oversee all implementation activities of the Safe Routes to School Sitka Master Plan, under advisement from the Sitka Safe Routes to School Advisory Committee, including:

- Holding regular planning meetings of the Advisory Committee
- Providing regular reports to the Advisory Committee
- Collaborating with partner organizations and related city and state departments
- Collecting, analyzing, and reporting evaluative data as described by the plan.
- Ensuring regular communication with Sate SRTS Coordinator and timely reporting of all State Safe Routes to School grant requirements.

Infrastructure

The Planning Coordinator is responsible for working with local, state, and federal entities in pursuit of Master Plan Infrastructure-related goals including:

- Collaborating with local, state, and federal entities to bring infrastructure projects to fruition.
- Seeking additional sources of funding for infrastructure project

Non-infrastructure

The Planning Coordinator will oversee all non-infrastructure projects as outlined in the Master Plan including:

- Organizing and implementing fall and spring campaigns
- Oversight of the mini-grant process
- Organizing and implementing pedestrian and bicycle safety education programs
- Coordinating enforcement efforts with local authorities
- Serving as a member of the Bicycle-Friendly Coalition

The Planning Coordinator is a half-time position, and will be contracted for the period of one year, to commence once funding is secured. Continuation of the position beyond one year is pending additional funding.