

## Parents take steps to bring back walking

By Jillian Fennimore, Staff Writer

Watertown TAB

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Close to 30 years ago, 50 percent of young students walked to school.

Today, only 10 percent do.

It has become an age where children are passive behind the window of a car and less active on their feet, said Safe Route to School Coordinator Karen Hartke. But there are ways to turn that all around.

In Watertown, there are already signs of change.

At all three elementary schools, kids grip their parents hands tightly as they cross the road, run in sync with their friends to the double doors or bike their half-mile trip to class.

Mary Anne Peschier, who walks with her son to Lowell Elementary School each morning, said she hopes seeing more families hit the road instead of sitting behind the wheel would become a trend.

"It's definitely a catchy thing," she said. "It can work."

But many are still being dropped off during the morning rush, get picked up at the corner by the yellow school bus and live far enough not to be able to make the trek before the bell rings.

Hartke told parents and town officials on Tuesday that Watertown should take a new route in promoting street smarts to build a more "walkable" community, and turning kids toward a healthier lifestyle.

The "Safe Routes to School" program is an initiative of WalkBoston, a nonprofit membership organization founded in 1990, and dedicated to improving walking conditions in cities and towns across Massachusetts.

On Tuesday night, a program was co-sponsored by the Watertown Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee, Lowell School PTO, the Watertown Police Department and the Watertown Department of Public Works to foster communication about bringing back walking to the community.

Mari Ryan, a member of the Watertown Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee, said Watertown has all the elements to make it work.

"We really have the ideal town to do this," she said.

At Lowell and Cunniff elementary schools, many of their students are "walkers" and live close enough for a stroll to school. At Hosmer Elementary School, many students still utilize buses and face the challenge of living near a main artery (Mt. Auburn Street) and the danger of crossing or walking near a busy road.

"With all the talk lately about pedestrian accidents, it's important to remember the kids," said Ryan about improving street safety education and awareness.

Watertown Police Officer Anthony Fantasia, who is assigned to all three elementary schools, said the key is to start small and realize the potential within the community.

“We live in community that is not that big,” he said. “We do have main arteries, but most areas are neighborhoods.”

From an engineering standpoint, Department of Public Works Director Gerald Mee said keeping streets and sidewalks to proper walking standards is important to the department, but many sidewalk responsibilities lie in the hands of property owners, especially during winter.

“Just shovel the front of your property,” he said. “It’s not an unreasonable request. People should assume a certain amount of liability.”

Hartke said creating a “walkable community” can start with students taking part in “Walk to School Days” or having a “Walk Wednesday” each week that kids and parents can participate in.

Kara Flynn, a parent of two children at Lowell who both walk to school, said there are many ideas that could catch on with Watertown families.

“I think this will build very quickly,” she said.

For more information on Safe Routes to School or to take part in the Watertown initiative, e-mail [walking@wces.org](mailto:walking@wces.org).