

*Engaging Community Partners and Youth to Enhance and Sustain Safe  
Routes to Schools*

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16. Abstract Safe Routes to School programs increase the number of children who walk and bike to school. By building pedestrian skills at a young age, students are more likely to choose active transportation modes across their lifespan, therefore decreasing vehicle miles traveled, reducing vehicle emissions, preventing chronic disease, and improving physical health overall. The Safe Routes to School Program provides critical support for organizing and implementing pedestrian safety education and encouragement activities. These activities are critical for developing skills to walk and bike safely among one of our community's most vulnerable road users, children. Between February 2023 and September 2024, adult and youth partnerships have revitalized Safe Routes to School efforts within the City of Bozeman and surrounding areas. Walk audits, traffic calming art installations, and other community engagement activities creatively solicited youth voices and ideas in transportation planning and promotion of safe active transportation. Safe Routes to School programs are challenged to find consistent funding to sustain efforts within the community.			
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# Engaging Community Partners and Youth to Enhance and Sustain Safe Routes to Schools

Western Transportation Institute (WTI) convened a group of key stakeholders to provide Safe Routes to School programming for the Bozeman area and adjacent school districts and to promote active transportation and safe mobility with students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Studies demonstrate that Safe Routes to School projects and programs increase the number of children who walk and bike to school. By building pedestrian skills at a young age, students are more likely to choose active transportation modes across their lifespan, therefore decreasing vehicle miles traveled, reducing vehicle emissions, preventing chronic disease, and improving physical health overall. The Safe Routes to School Program provides critical support for organizing and implementing pedestrian safety education and encouragement activities. These activities are critical for developing skills to walk and bike safely among one of our community's most vulnerable road users, children.

Recent tragedies and safety events have highlighted the importance of collaborative community efforts to increase safety for all road users and to engage underrepresented populations in community conversations related to mobility. Changes in funding over the past decade have decreased focus on Safe Routes to Schools, creating challenges for programming and sustainability of coordinated efforts to create safe and equitable mobility options.

*Figure 1 City of Bozeman Parks and Recreation staff greet students as they gather for the Walking School Bus and walk or bike to school*

## Project Partners

- **Western Transportation Institute:** Jen MacFarlane, Matt Madsen, Rebecca Gleason
- **City of Bozeman:** Candace Mastel, Taylor Lonsdale, Holly Crane, Jamie Saitta
- **BSD7:** Adrian Advincula, Marilyn King, Mike VanVuren, Susan Atkinson, Heather Chvojka, William Dickerson, Troy Lenneman, Jonathan Morris, Patrick Hoffman, Hailey Vidmar, Mike Waterman, Douglas Kellie
- **Gallatin County Sheriff's Department:** Erin Clements
- **Headwaters Academy:** Ginnefre Hartman and Headwaters Academy teachers and staff
- **Monforton School District:** Darren Strauch, Andy Rowse, Laura Axman, Phil Weiss, Kayli Krohn, Megan Stratton, Sierra Drake
- **Big Sky SNO:** Lizzy Peyton
- **And many more:** Thank you to all the parents, students, and community volunteers who gave their time to make our community safer for walking and biking!



## Background

Between February 2023 and September 2024, adult and youth partnerships have revitalized Safe Routes to School efforts within the City of Bozeman and surrounding areas. Walk audits, traffic calming art installations, and other community engagement activities creatively solicited youth voices and ideas in transportation planning and promotion of safe active transportation within the community. Other engagement processes like bicycle rodeos, Bike/Walk to School Days, and walking school buses or bike trains have allowed youth to choose active modes of transportation and build skills for safe, independent, and active travel. These engagement experiences can help to enhance critical awareness and reflection within a community (Glanz, 2015) while allowing the community to interact with the next generation of riders and walkers. WTI staff assisted in coordinating stakeholder groups and volunteers while providing services to area school districts for education, outreach, parent and youth engagement, and program evaluation. Below is an overview of the accomplishments of this project since convening stakeholders in November of 2022.

## Accomplishments

In January and February 2023, the project team developed a logic model and goals and objectives for the remainder of FY23 and FY24. The logic model outlined short-term, medium, and long-term outcomes that Western Transportation Institute, the City of Bozeman, and surrounding area partners identified for the next 5+ years. Goals and objectives outline the tasks to be completed on an annual basis to achieve the outcomes identified in the logic model. A summary of accomplishments between February 2023 and October 2024 is outlined below.

### Goal 1: Partner with community organizations and constituents to create safer streets programming.

**Walking School Bus:** Between April 26<sup>th</sup> and June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, WTI and the City of Bozeman Parks and Recreation team worked with Hyalite and Meadowlark Elementary Schools to implement two Walking School Bus (WSB) routes with a total of 13 individual events. Events were held on Wednesdays at Valley West Park (to Meadowlark School) and Fridays at the Bozeman Pond (to Hyalite School). The City of Bozeman Parks and Recreation Department supplied two adult staff members for each location and event. After the pilot WSB events concluded on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, parents and students requested the program again in the Fall. In August, City of Bozeman Parks and Recreation Department renewed a weekly WSB at each school in connection with the department's Rec Mobile; a program that brings youth activities to neighborhood parks. The WSB program was discontinued in the late autumn when weather impacted participation. Unfortunately, the City of Bozeman Parks and Recreation Department no longer has the capacity to staff WSB events, so they were paused for the spring semester. WTI staff has been in contact with the Parent Advisory Councils at both schools and is strategizing ways to recruit volunteers to continue the program. Discussions of WSB continuation and expansion included the recruitment of Community Connect volunteers to assist with additional WSB locations.

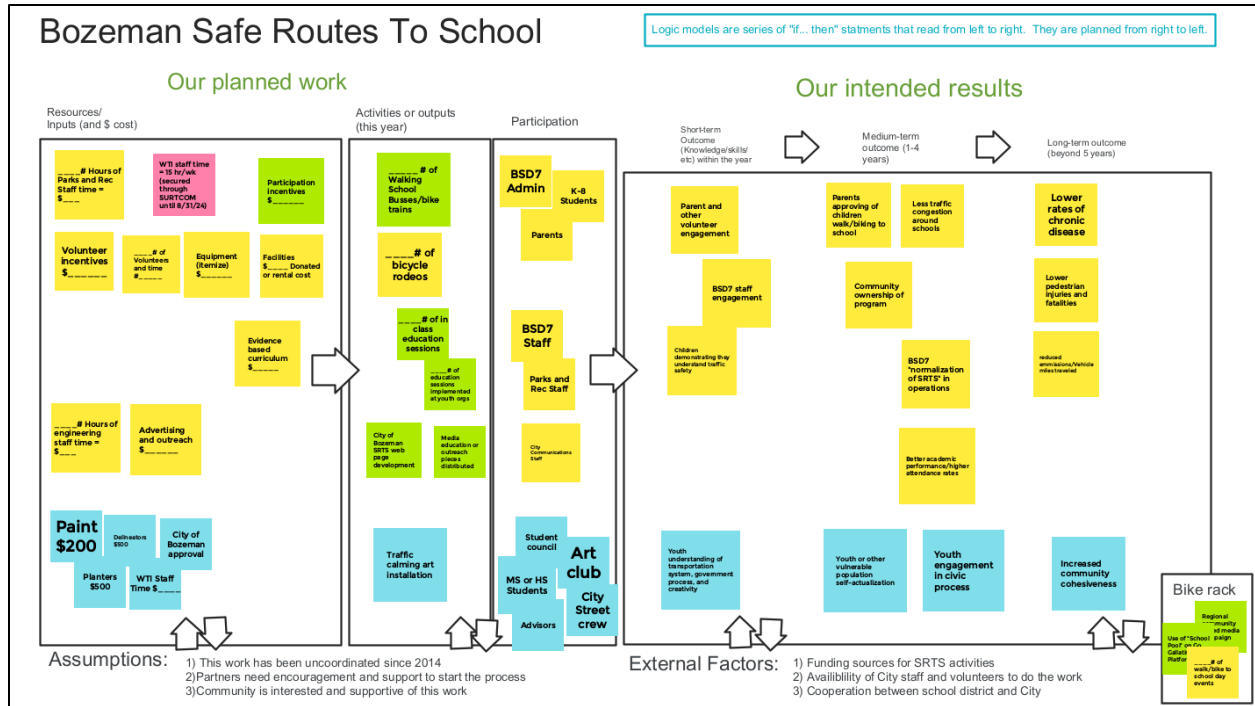


Figure 2: Bozeman Safe Routes to School Logic Model outlining the resources needed, activities to implement, and short/long-term outcomes expected from the program.

**Bicycle Rodeo:** Bicycle rodeo educational events were implemented at Headwaters Academy and Monforton School in September of 2023 and 2024. A community wide event hosted by BSD7 was held Spring of 2024, and another is planned for October 2024. WTI staff also collaborated with Big Sky SNO to offer pedestrian and bicycle safety education to youth at the Big Sy Explorer’s Camp. Approximately 25 students engaged in a bicycle rodeo and developed their active transportation knowledge including hand signals, bicycle maintenance, and protective equipment. Participants developed bicycle control skills in the bicycle rodeo course.

School leadership and administrative support is essential for planning and implementing these events. WTI staff has been able to support by provided technical assistance for school staff, whereas City of Bozeman staff has secured commitments from local organizations to assist with helmet distribution, bicycle maintenance, and other age-appropriate community education.

**Walk/Bile to school Day:** In May 2023 and 2024, WTI staff provided support for Walk/Bike to school day where Monforton School families were encouraged to use active modes of transportation to get to and from school. Students who rode the bus because of a lack of safe pedestrian infrastructure were offered a remote drop-off in a safe location and provided an opportunity to walk safely to school from a nearby neighborhood.

**Incentive program:** WTI staff assisted the Monforton Moves Committee in planning for implementation of the Monforton Movie-it! Incentive Program. This program allows students to earn rewards from local businesses in the Four Corners area by using active transportation when traveling to school and by engaging in other healthy behaviors. This program has been a great way to build community, for families to actively explore their neighborhoods, and support commerce in an automobile centric area of the community.

**School Pool:** WTI worked with administration of Bozeman School District and Monforton School District to implement the School Pool Parent Carpool Directory at each of those districts' schools. School Pool is part of the Go Gallatin platform that is widely used in Gallatin County for carpooling and other sustainable commutes. The School Pool Directory is specific to schools and is a secure way for parents to connect and plan their child's commute to school while decreasing school related traffic. Implementation of School Pool has been more successful in those schools with strong leadership support for use of the program. Headwaters Academy plans to implement School Pool in the near future.

**Community Events:** Youth pedestrian safety education and engagement activities were integrated into existing and ongoing community events that attract youth and families.

*Summer Lunch:* Active transportation promotional materials and skill building activities were offered at four Gallatin Valley Food Bank Summer Lunch Program sites. Participants engaged in bicycle button making, mini-bicycle obstacle courses, and coloring activities to bring awareness to bicycle roadway hazards and safety.

*GVBC Bike Swap:* At the Gallatin Valley Bicycle Club's Bike Swap on May 5, 2023, City of Bozeman and WTI staff engaged with families and children to bring awareness to pedestrian and traffic safety efforts within the community (walking school bus, bicycle rodeo, commuter challenge, etc.). Youth were further engaged through artistic means to identify factors that would encourage them to ride their bikes more often.

## Goal 2: Create and implement youth pedestrian and traffic safety education.

**Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Box:** WTI staff worked with Susan Atkinson of BSD7 to create a health enhancement box specific to pedestrian and bicycle safety that will rotate through elementary schools annually. Furthermore, WTI and City of Bozeman staff have been working to develop relationships with school administration and staff. We have offered to assist with pedestrian and traffic safety lessons in the schools and driver education courses.

**Bicycle Rodeo Primer:** "Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley Area Bicycle Rodeos," a local bicycle rodeo implementation guide, was created to assist area school staff with future bicycle rodeo events and has been distributed to multiple community partners engaging youth in bicycle education. WTI staff created the four-page Bicycle Rodeo Primer as a resource for Health Enhancement teachers and event organizers to use. The document includes information on general bicycle safety and maintenance, stations that can be part of a bicycle rodeo course, number of volunteers, and additional community groups to invite to the event.

**Walk and Roll to School Maps:** WTI staff created 1-mile radius active transportation maps centered around each of the BSD7 schools that highlight transportation infrastructure that support walking and biking to school. For example, intersections with crosswalks, traffic signals, flashing beacons, and crossing guards are highlighted. Trails, multi-use paths, and school zones are also prominently featured on the maps. These maps were distributed throughout BSD7 administration and among health enhancement teachers.

## Goal 3: Engage youth in transportation planning.

**Young Adult and College Students:** WTI staff have worked with and engaged Montana State University students through internships to plan and implement Safe Routes to School programming across the spring semesters in 2023 and 2024. Interns engaged in community relations, promotion, planning and



implementation of programs with City of Bozeman, BSD7, and Monforton School staff. Additionally, they investigated funding options implemented through other communities and produced ‘case studies to inform decision makers. Student internships provide hands-on and practical experience with the intersection between community health, transportation, and Safe Routes to School. Additionally, WTI staff has engaged MSU Honors College Design Thinking Course students in transportation planning and design projects to increase use of active transportation on College Street and South 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Student projects center around community engagement and ensuring transportation planning incorporates the needs of community members.

**High School Engagement:** In Spring 2023 and 2024, WTI staff worked with the Art Clubs at Bozeman High School and Gallatin High School to engage students in pop-up traffic calming and placemaking projects. Students designed and installed artwork for a traffic calming installation on Beall and 15<sup>th</sup> Ave located behind Bozeman High School. Additionally, students designed and painted planters used in temporary curb extensions and other traffic calming features across the community.

**Walk Audit:** WTI staff collaborated with Monforton School 5th grade teachers to educate students about active transportation, pedestrian and traffic safety, and transportation infrastructure. Students were engaged in a walk audit and provided valuable feedback on current infrastructure and changes that could be made to increase comfort and safety. The walk audit form included a space for students to articulate their thoughts through art and drawing. This was valuable for soliciting participant’s thoughts that may not have been included through a text description.

**Art as a Community Engagement Tool:** At the Annual Bike Swap, youth were engaged in a self-actualization activity where they identified barriers preventing them from riding their bicycles and changes that would encourage more bicycle riding. The activity utilized creative means to solicit thoughts from youth who may or may not be able to articulate in writing. This activity demonstrated how people with communication barriers can be engaged in transportation planning efforts.

A poster board was displayed with an image of a genie riding a bicycle with the prompt “The bicycle genie wants you to be safe when riding your bicycle to school. What would help you ride your bike to school?” Alternatively, children were verbally prompted with the question, “What would help you ride your bike more often”? Youth were then allowed to write, draw, or use other materials to convey their thoughts. In total, there were 19 responses to the activity. Seven responses were text only whereas 12



Figure 3: Bozeman High School students painted this round about on 15<sup>th</sup> Street as part of a traffic calming and placemaking project.

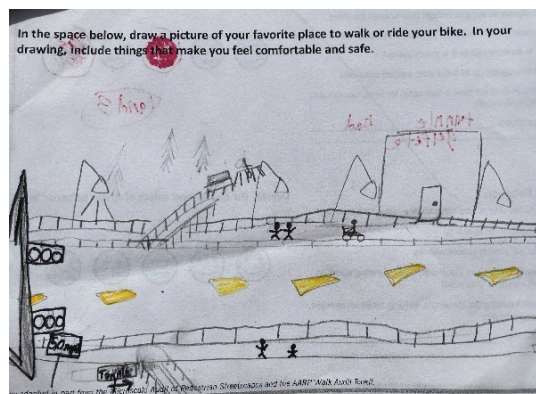


Figure 4: An image created as part of the walk audit process with Monforton School 5th grade students portraying elements of transportation design that increase comfort and safety for people walking and biking.



responses included imagery with text or imagery alone. Images and text were analyzed for contents and coded into categories. Categories of responses included high-cost infrastructure (sidewalks and shared use paths), lower-cost infrastructure (crosswalks), recreational infrastructure (dirt jumps, paths along creeks, pump track), programming or education (crossing guards, slower speeds, traffic calming), safety gear (helmets, bells, training wheels), and natural elements (creeks, trees, and hills).

#### Goal 4: Secure sustainable funding for regional SRTS programming.

**Budget Process:** City of Bozeman staff have secured funding through the FY25 budget process to continue with Transportation Demand Management efforts including SRTS outreach and education. This funding will allow for .25 FTE to continue with future SRTS organization in Bozeman throughout FY25 and FY26 if funding is reallocated.

**Grants:** WTI staff investigated the process for applying for Transportation Alternatives Funding from the Montana Department of Transportation and SS4A funding through the US Department of Transportation. Due to staff constraints, this effort was put on hold for the time being. Transportation Alternatives funding is used in the MPO's that serve Missoula and Billings to support Safe Routes to School programming and planning. Once an MPO is established in Bozeman and Gallatin County, Transportation Alternatives funding may become an option for supporting a comprehensive Safe Routes to School program.

## Challenges and Recommendations

### Sustainable and coordinated funding.

Changes in funding over the past decade have decreased focus on Safe Routes to Schools across many of Montana's communities. A reprioritization of funding away from dedicated SRTS programming creates challenges for sustainability of coordinated efforts to create safe and equitable mobility options. School Districts are financially stressed and have expressed that staffing levels are not conducive for SRTS coordination at the district level. School administrators have expressed that coordination support from outside agencies is critical to school and community engagement.

Future funding for regional coordination of Safe Routes to School efforts is critical for the sustainability of ongoing coordinated efforts. WTI utilized SURTCOM funding to coordinate SRTS efforts described in this report but this funding expired September 30, 2024. Without the support of a secure funding source, current regional efforts may not be sustainable. Other large Montana communities like Billings and Missoula fund school district SRTS efforts through Transportation Alternatives funding through their Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). An MPO can pass a resolution dedicating a portion of its Transportation Alternatives funding to SRTS projects. The formation of a new MPO in Bozeman and the surrounding area may be a possible source of Transportation Alternatives funding for SRTS programming in the future.



Figure 5: Youth provided responses to the question "The bicycle genie wants you to be safe when riding your bicycle. What would help you ride your bicycle to school?" Youth provided text and artistic answers.



## References

Glanz, K. (2015). *Health Behavior: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Wiley and Sons.