

Safe Routes to School Action Team: The Heart of New Ulm in Action for Safety on the Roads

In the community of New Ulm, Minn., parents shared in a survey that they were hesitant to let their children walk or ride their bicycle to school due to the speed of traffic, the amount of traffic and uncontrolled intersections. To help address those barriers and make streets safer for *everyone* in the community – especially kids – a Safe Routes to School planning initiative was born.

New Ulm's Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Plan was launched in June 2015 through a cooperative effort between St. Paul Lutheran and St. Anthony Elementary Schools, New Ulm Public Schools and River Bend Education District. Region Nine Development Commission facilitated the planning process and presented the written plan to SRTS planning committee. Since that time, the SRTS planning committee has evolved into one of The Heart of New Ulm Project's Action Teams and The Heart of New Ulm Project facilitates the meetings and monitors progress on the plan.

Since 2015, the SRTS team has been successful due to the strong partnership and support from all the schools, the City of New Ulm, the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) serving Brown County, and parent volunteers.

An Impressive List of Successes in Promoting Safety

Since 2015, 14 SRTS team accomplishments have included:

1. Safe walking and biking routes: These routes were created in 2016 and have been printed and published in a variety of different places in New Ulm. The routes are posted on The Heart of New Ulm website and the various school websites for easy access for parents and children. Some of the biking routes include streets with painted bike sharrows that connect to the Bike Circle Route in numerous locations throughout town.

2. Annual Walk/Bike to School Day celebrations: Each May and October, all of the schools promote and participate in the National Walk and Bike to School Days. Rather than drop their children off at school, parents are encouraged to drop their children off at one of three remote locations that are manned by volunteers and parents. The children then walk in a "walking school bus" formation to their schools. The children love to participate (when the weather cooperates) and often ask to do it more often.



The SEE.SAFE.SMART. safety campaign encouraged people to SEE people bicycling and walking, act SAFE and be SMART in their behavior.

3. Enhanced crosswalks near all schools: All of the schools now have at least one enhanced (diagonal) crosswalk painted at their location; these crosswalks are more visible to approaching vehicles and have been proven to increase yielding behavior.

4. City adoption of a Complete Streets Policy: In October 2016, the City of New Ulm adopted a Complete Streets Policy. Complete Streets is a transportation network approach that considers the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, motorists and commercial and emergency vehicles – generally referred to as all users. The goal of Complete Streets is a transportation system that is accessible, equitable and adapted to serve the needs of individuals regardless of how they choose to travel. Placing a focus on all users when street work is done has allowed the city to think differently about how to move people through the community.

(continued)

5. Traffic calming measures at key locations: The installation of a mid-block crossing near the Recreation Center is an example of a traffic calming measure that has improved safety for people crossing the street. In September 2017, a demonstration curb extension project was tested near St. Anthony Elementary School to make it safer for children to walk or bike to school. The demonstration project was a success in slowing traffic and improving safety, and the team is now working with the city to install permanent curb extensions when street work is planned. Two "Stop for Pedestrians in the Crosswalk" signs were purchased and placed at two intersections to remind drivers to stop for people waiting to cross the street. This has helped improve yielding the right of way in both locations.

6. Annual Bike Expo to teach bike safety skills: For the past several years, The Heart of New Ulm has incorporated a bike rodeo into the Day of Play events, and more recently the Bike Expo. The New Ulm Police Department has volunteered their time and staff to teach children proper bike handling skills and how to ride safely on the road.

7. Bike fleet and trailer: With funding from SHIP, New Ulm Community Education was able to secure a fleet of bikes sized for students in grades 4 thru 6 along with a trailer to store the bikes and transport them between the schools and organizations offering bike safety skills training.

8. "Walk! Bike! Fun!" curriculum: The SHIP program has trained physical education teachers at most of New Ulm elementary schools in the Walk! Bike! Fun! curriculum that teaches students in kindergarten thru grade 3 how to be safe pedestrians and students in grades 4 thru 6 students how to be a safe bicyclist. The curriculum is generally taught during the physical education classes and access to the bike fleet allows students to participate without having to bring their own bikes.

9. SEE.SAFE.SMART. campaign: To help ensure everyone's safety on New Ulm's sidewalks and streets, and encourage people to make smart decisions when encountering people walking and riding their bikes, the SRTS Action Team launched a year-long public safety campaign in September 2017. The campaign reminded people to SEE people walking and bicycling, act SAFE, and be SMART. Each month, a different safety message reminded people to be aware of and alert to people who are out walking and biking in the community — especially kids. The safety messages featured photos of kids and adults from New Ulm and highlighted specific problem areas and all of the schools in New Ulm participated in the campaign. The team plans to implement a similar campaign again in a few years.

10. Improved arrival and dismissal process at Middle School campus: Before construction started on repurposing the former New Ulm High School and Jefferson Elementary School campus, a demonstration project tested a new arrival and departure process for the schools. The purpose of the demonstration project was to separate the different modes of traffic and to improve safety in the area to encourage more walking and biking to school. After

the project was completed, feedback was gathered from everyone involved. Today's process is the result of testing and implementing lessons learned, and is more organized and safer for everyone.

11. Safe walking and biking tip sheet: To encourage more walking and biking, the SRTS team created a tip sheet with safety tips for parents to share with their children about safe walking and biking techniques. The tip sheet was distributed through all of the schools prior to the beginning of the 2018-19 school year.

12. Reflective zipper pulls: With the majority of the school year occurring during the darker months, the schools felt it was important to provide students with light reflective gear so they would be seen more easily when walking to the bus or walking or biking to school. Reflective Minnesota-shaped zipper pulls featuring the SHIP logo were distributed to many of the students in New Ulm.

13. Wayfinding signs: Wayfinding signs were installed at five- and 10-minute intervals from St. Paul Lutheran Elementary, St. Anthony Elementary and the Middle School campus. The signs remind parents and children that it's only a short walk from each location to their school. A QR code on the signs brings up a map on a smartphone of the identified safe route to their school.



14. New speed buggy: The SHIP program provided funding to the New Ulm Police Department to replace their old speed buggy and replace it with a new model that collects data as well as flashes the current speed. The SRTS Action Team uses the information to identify which streets need further traffic calming measures to help reduce the speed of traffic — one of the main reasons parents have cited for not allowing their children to walk or bike to school.

Looking forward, the SRTS team is working on updating the current plan so it includes the new high school. Several other activities are underway, including working with the city to install a Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacon at a particular intersection and working to test a neighborhood "walking school bus" that will be run by parents on a regular basis in the spring and fall. The SRTS team will continue to conduct parent surveys and student tally sheets on a regular basis in order to measure progress and update goals and objectives.