



A City Where Kids Can Walk to School (White Paper)

What is it?

“Schools First” is Mayor Mark Funkhouser’s initiative that targets neighborhoods around schools to address community infrastructure needs, blighted conditions, and safety concerns in Kansas City, Mo. By providing a safe and pleasant environment for kids to walk to school, this initiative will also improve the community quality of life as a whole. This initiative ties together and builds on Mayor Funkhouser’s other initiatives, such as,

- Improving public infrastructure,
- Improving multi-mode regional public transportation,
- Property code enforcement and nuisance abatement,
- Supporting Kansas City children to realize their full potentials,
- Reducing crime,
- Increasing the economic viability of Kansas City, and
- Keeping and attracting residents to the city, especially back to the urban core.

Why focus on communities around schools?

There are about 75,000 school-aged children in Kansas City attending more than 270 elementary, middle/junior, and high schools. These public and private schools are much more than a learning institution for these children; they are centers of life and learning for our communities and have long served as neighborhood anchors. School buildings and their surrounding infrastructure represent community investments that inspire civic pride and participation in public life. They are viewed as cornerstones of our neighborhoods and provide a sense of stability as they remain stable while businesses or residents may come and go. They connect families with the broader community and are part of the glue that holds communities together.

It is a sign of a mentally-healthy and safe community when children can walk to and from school by themselves. While schools and their surrounding environment play important roles in our community life, many of our kids are not able to walk to school anymore for reasons such as safety concerns and poor infrastructure conditions. This initiative is to create and sustain a safe and well-maintained community throughout the city, starting with the areas around schools.

What are the benefits?

This initiative responds to an area of need identified by schools, parents and neighborhoods. It will invest in our community and build on the assets our urban community already has. Synergizing with the Mayor's other initiatives and community efforts, it will increase neighborhood safety and walkability. It will provide support to schools, children and families with a safe environment. It will help sustain our neighborhoods, build effective links between schools, communities and the city government, and ultimately, revitalize Kansas City.

The initiative will make our community a place where walking is safe and enjoyable.

The Kansas City metro area was recently ranked the 20th most dangerous place for pedestrians nationwide and the most dangerous in Missouri and Kansas, according to a study by the Surface Transportation Policy Partnership and Transportation for America. Besides the distance to school, safety has been one of the primary reasons that parents do not want their kids to walk to and from school. They worry about their children walking in streets where there are no sidewalks or crossing a busy street with no crossing guard or traffic signs. They also worry about the dangers of abandoned houses, vacant lots, excessive weeds, illegal dumping, and graffiti.

The initiative, therefore, will invest in infrastructure to make walking safe and enjoyable, building or repairing sidewalks, crosswalks, crossing signals and other traffic signs and signals, and street lighting. It will increase police presence during school hours and increase other safety measures, including enforcing traffic laws, placing crossing guards where needed, and removing stray dogs. It will also remove blighted conditions by demolishing dangerous buildings, removing graffiti, enforcing nuisance and property codes, cutting excessive weeds and tree branches, and removing illegal dumping and trash.

The initiative will increase the livability and economic vitality of our community. A safe, well-maintained and walkable community enhances housing values, increases business activities, and gives a good reason for people to stay or move here. Kansas City's urban core has lost nearly 100,000 residents over the last four decades. The loss of residents has depleted the city's tax base, damaged thriving middle class neighborhoods, and resulted in urban decline. Although several issues and events have been catalysts for the urban flight, among the most fundamental challenges to a rejuvenated urban core are crime and disinvestment in public infrastructure. Families, as well as businesses, will find a powerful incentive to stay or return to Kansas City when the quality, and perception, of these issues improves.

National studies show that houses with above average walkability command a premium of about \$4,000 to \$34,000 over houses with just average levels of walkability in typical metro areas. Similarly, an analysis of office, retail, apartment and industrial properties found higher values for more pedestrian friendly properties. Therefore, making our community more walkable will not only improve its safety and encourage physical

activity, but also help restore the local tax base and boost the local economy. The initiative will increase the livability of our community in a holistic way.

The initiative is long-range and will sustain. School buildings and the infrastructure surrounding the schools are valuable assets in our community. Many of our neighborhood schools were designed and built for access by foot, instead of by cars and buses. This initiative, building on these urban assets, is to repair, upgrade and revitalize the existing infrastructure and facilities. It will also invest in new infrastructure, such as sidewalks, around suburban schools where pedestrian infrastructure is absent. These infrastructures, if well-maintained, will sustain and serve our community for generations. They will provide a sense of stability and play an important role in linking schools, families, our community and the city government together. This initiative will improve the quality of life of our community in the long term.

The initiative will increase the physical well-being of our community. Walking, the most basic and common mode of transportation, has been engineered out of our lives for decades. Many of our streets are designed to be convenient for cars, not for pedestrians and bicyclists. Our kids have been deprived of the joy and independence of walking to school and in their neighborhoods. More than half of children who attended schools in the U.S. walked to school in the 1970s, but now about three out of four arrive at school by car or bus. The replacement of walking by automobile travel has been linked to lack of physical activities, the epidemic of obesity, and other health problems.

This initiative will return the activities and laughter of school children to our streetscape. It will also allow joggers to jog and bikers to bike in safe, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. It will reduce traffic deaths and injuries, increase residents' physical activities, and reduce transportation expenses. It will also increase the mobility of our children, the elderly, people with disabilities and people without cars. It will improve community well being and protect our environment.

What other programs or community efforts can this initiative leverage on?

We need to identify other related community initiatives and efforts on which the initiative can build.

The Kansas City Walkability Plan. The plan was adopted by the Council in 2003, which made a commitment to improve conditions for pedestrians, both children and adults. An important objective of the plan is to provide a better pedestrian environment to enable children to walk to schools in the city. The plan provides recommendations to improve pedestrian safety, predict pedestrian demand areas, provide a systematic way to measure the quality of Kansas City's pedestrian system, provide recommendations for good pedestrian infrastructure design, promote education and enforcement, and identify capital improvement investment strategies.

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED). It is a concept promoting principles of community design and maintenance for inducing safe

environments. The concept is supported by Greater Kansas City Crime Commission and police organizations. The Greater Kansas City Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) recently paid for three KCPD officers to attend the CPTED training, and these officers will offer classes to community about how proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear of crime and incidence of crime, and to an improvement in quality of life.

The Walking School Bus Program. Initiated through Bridging the Gap, the program organizes parents to ensure the safe travel of children to school. It encourages a group of children walking to school with one or more adults. A variation on the walking school bus is the bicycle train, in which adults supervise children riding their bikes to school.

Safe Routes to School. The program sponsored by U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is recognized as a model to enable community leaders, schools and parents across the United States to improve safety and increase the number of children to walk and bicycle to school.

Kids Walk to School. Sponsored by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it is a community based program to increase opportunities for daily physical activity by encouraging children to walk to and from school in groups accompanied by adults.

Who could be the partners?

We need to identify partners in the community, attract them, and work with them in a coordinated and strategic way. The sponsors of the above programs should be partners of this initiative. Other local partners include:

- Schools (teachers, administrators, school boards)
- Parents, including parent teacher associations (PTAs) and school advisory councils (SACs)
- Students (e.g. student councils)
- Public/elected officials, including council members, county legislators, state representatives, etc.
- Neighborhood associations, including home owners associations and tenants associations
- Community development councils (CDCs)
- Police
- City departments (e.g. Health, Public Works, Parks and Recreation, City Planning and Development, Neighborhood and Community Services)
- Transportation agencies
- Health organizations and coalitions (e.g. KC Healthy Kids)
- Environment advocate agencies (e.g. Bridging The Gap)
- Regional organizations (e.g. Mid-America Regional Council)
- Businesses, including business association and chambers
- Civic organizations

- Churches, other faith based organizations and denominational leaders
- Foundation and philanthropic leaders (e.g. Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City)
- Youth and Educational Advocacy Organizations

How about the funding?

We need to identify funding sources, secure and maximize the impact of federal, city and private funding streams that are aimed at issues related to this initiative. We need to identify and address different needs in different parts of the city. Schools, including their PTAs, should be engaged in identifying needs or barriers to walking to school. A citizen committee could evaluate the funding proposals based on criteria including needs, proposal merits, and community impacts.

Federal Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). There is considerable interest in Washington, D.C., especially with Rep. Oberstar, House Transportation Chairman, to continue the Safe Routes to School program. The funds from prior years' programs have been expended, but the city could position itself to be highly competitive in a future program.

Federal Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality and the Transportation Enhancements program. The city annually competes for funding through these two programs that can support pedestrian projects.

Federal Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS). The FHWA program makes funding available for a wide variety of programs and projects, from building sidewalks, to safer street crossings, education programs that encourage children and their parents to walk and bicycle safely to school. It distributed more than \$600 million over five years to each state by federal formula for thousands of projects nationwide.

Active Living Grant program. The Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City has an Active Living Grant program and has expressed interest in funding programs to evaluate children's health factors in the city's development review process.

Prioritizing city spending. The council should have a policy to prioritize city departments' resources that emphasize compatible projects – Bicycle/Pedestrian Program (Public Works), Trails (Parks and Recreation), long range planning (City Development and Planning), street cleaning and catch basin cleaning (Water Services), codes enforcement (Neighborhood and Community Services), police presence (Police), etc.

PIAC funding. A council policy could ask PIAC to dedicate a portion of its funds to this initiative or to set some policies that would increase the priority given to types of investment related to this initiative.

Public Safety Tax. A portion of this tax could be used to increase the presence of safety personnel around schools. This tax will expire on June 30, 2011. Voters need to approve its usage at the renewal.

Bonds. Bonds could be issued for building, repairing and upgrading sidewalks with a half mile radius around public and private elementary, middle/junior and high schools. The approximate cost is about \$100m, which is about \$8m debt payment for 20 years.

What other things should be done?

The city needs to review its development code to ensure that decisions on future school sites and school site design support opportunities for children to walk to school safely.

The city could also consider implementing a Health Impact Assessment program in the city's development review process to include health department personnel in the review of development applications to consider children's health factors.