

Beaverhead Trails Coalition Strategic Plan

Walking School Bus

Program Name & Mission

BTC's Walking School Bus (WSB) Program is largely autonomous, taking little of BTC's organization time or funding. While its scope is limited compared to BTC's other programs, its mission is integral to BTC's organizational mission.

The WSB is directly connected to BTC's organizational goal of promoting healthy lifestyles. While the program does not currently work directly on infrastructure projects, over the next five years it could play an important supporting role in helping to advocate for high priority infrastructure projects identified by the In-Town Trails Program.

Program Mission

BTC's Walking School Bus Program has developed the following mission statement.

The Walking School Bus (WSB) program's mission is to ensure the safety of children on their walk to school. Along the way, students learn how to cross streets properly, have fun, and become comfortable in their neighborhoods. Our volunteers enjoy being involved in our community and having the opportunity to be positive influences in the children's lives.

National Partnership Mission

BTC is one of hundreds of partner organizations throughout the nation working to provide safe routes to school. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership website articulates the mission of the nationwide efforts:

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership is a nonprofit organization that improves quality of life for kids and communities by promoting healthy living, safe infrastructure, and physical activity, starting with bicycling and walking to school and beyond. We advance policy change; catalyze support with a network of more than 750 partner organizations, as well as schools, policy makers, and grassroots supporters; and we share our deep expertise at national, state and local levels with those helping propel our mission.

<http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/who-we-are>

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs are sustained efforts by parents, schools, community leaders and local, state, and federal governments to improve the health and well-being of children by enabling and encouraging them to walk and bicycle to school.

SRTS programs examine conditions around schools and conduct projects and activities that work to improve safety and accessibility, and reduce traffic and air pollution in the vicinity of schools.

As a result, these programs help make bicycling and walking to school safer and more appealing transportation choices thus encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age.

Walking School Bus Goals

Following are draft goal statements developed for BTC's late-Fall 2016 strategic planning public meeting.

- Increase the number of students participating.
- Increase volunteer participation.
- Walk over 500 miles per season and 1,000 miles for the school year.

BTC Safe Routes to School Accomplishments

In BTC's first years as an organization, its SRTS efforts achieved significant accomplishments. From 2011-2014, BTC acquired substantial SRTS grants from the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). These grants were administered through the City of Dillon, and were used to fund outreach, education, and infrastructure improvements; as well as launching the Bicycle Recycling and Walking School Bus Programs.

- **Pedestrian Infrastructure** – Over \$75,000 in MDT funding was used to improve pedestrian safety and access near Parkview Elementary School. Sidewalks and intersections were improved, including striping crosswalks along the WSB routes and installing yellow "Safe Routes to School" signs to mark the routes.
- **Education and Awareness** – BTC secured over \$40,000 in MDT grants for education and awareness efforts to encourage safe walking and biking. This work included:
 - Launching the Bicycle Recycling Program.
 - Journey's from Home bicycle and pedestrian safety training in elementary schools.
 - Distributing bicycle helmets to community members.
 - Booths at the County Fair and the Health Fair.
 - A youth bicycle rodeo.
 - A family bike/walk event.

WSB Program History, Overview, and Needs

The Walking School Bus concept was created as part of the federal Safe Routes to School Program which was active from 2006 until 2016. Nationwide efforts are ongoing through The Safe Routes to School National Partnership, a nonprofit organization that helps to network over 750 partners such as BTC.

The Dillon chapter of the Walking School Bus began in 2010, walking a single route on Wednesdays. In its first years, BTC had funding to pay Americorp volunteers to coordinate the program. Currently, the WSB has two walking routes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings from September through October and April through May. In the 2016-2017 school year we walked close to 700 miles and averaged 30 student participants.

A biking school bus has never been tried due to the lack of safe biking routes, a lack of volunteers and the small number of children who bike to school.

Overview of Current Program

- The WSB serves students in Kindergarten through fifth grade.
- The program is coordinated by two volunteers who are each responsible for being the lead on one of the program's two routes.
- The lead volunteers recruit additional volunteers for each route. They also plan and lead all outreach, special events, etc.
- Each route requires two volunteers each day it operates. In Fall 2016, a total of 14 volunteers walked the routes with students.
- The WSB takes students to school in the mornings on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. There are no return routes in the afternoon.
- There is a Fall season from September through November (the week before Thanksgiving), and a Spring season from March through May.
- Route #1 is 1.1 miles, starting at Atlantic and Dillon, and travelling northeast to Parkview School. This route typically has 2 to 8 kids and takes 30 minutes from its starting point.
- Route #2 is 1.25 miles, travelling south to Parkview starting at Sunrise Street. This route typically has approximately 14 kids and takes 35 minutes from its starting point.
- During Fall 2016, there were approximately 20 students participating.
- Most participants are from the neighborhoods the routes pass through. However, some kids who live outside of town are dropped off at the start of the routes.

Needs and Challenges

The WSB leaders have identified the following needs and challenges.

Participants & Volunteers

- The primary challenge facing the program is that the number of student participants and volunteers has been dropping. Participation has dropped from a high of 25 students several years ago, to 20 or less recently. The WSB is more fun when more kids participate, so an upward participation trend tends to reinforce itself, while a downward trend will lead to decreasing participation. Thus, it is important to reverse the current downward trend.
- In the years since BTC's funding for Americorps volunteers ended, there has been significantly less capacity to recruit and manage volunteers.
- The current school bus route creates a disincentive for walking because the bus will pick kids up within two blocks of the school.
- Another disincentive is that kids can wake up later if they ride the bus.

Marketing

- The WSB Program's outreach to and coordination with the school has been limited.
- Good pictures of kids having fun walking to school are very effective for marketing. The program could use more good photos. However, any program that works with children has to be extremely careful not to publish pictures of kids unless the parents have signed a photo release. This is difficult to coordinate and track. It can also be difficult to get usable photos when approved kids intermingle with unapproved kids.
- More yellow signs are needed on the routes to increase awareness of the WSB.

Infrastructure

- There are missing links in the sidewalk system on the routes to school.
- The lack of a safe crossing on S. Atlantic St. has been a barrier to creating a route serving neighborhoods in the east half of the City.
- Some of the intersection crosswalk striping is deteriorating.

Five Year Plan Strategies

Over the next five years the most important strategies for the WSB Program fall into two categories:

- 1) **Volunteers and Leadership** – Ensure the program remains sustainable by continuing to strengthen the WSB volunteer team, recruiting more volunteers and developing more leaders to share the workload.
- 2) **Outreach and Promotion** – Better achieve the program’s mission by increasing the number of students participating.

Secondary strategies could include:

- **Infrastructure Funding** – Advocating for and possibly working to secure funding for infrastructure improvements such as completing gaps in the sidewalk system.
- **Additional Route** – Exploring the possibility of creating an additional route.

Marketing Strategies

Effectively promoting the WSB requires identifying target audiences, determining the most effective messages for motivating them, and finding the best ways to reach them. The coordinating volunteer’s capacity to market target audiences is limited due to time, family dynamics, family location, etc.

Target Audiences

There are probably a variety of different target audiences that could be identified for expanding participation in the WSB. Following are a few examples:

- **Age of Children** – The WSB serves students in Kindergarten through fifth grade. What
- **Family Location** – The WSB targets families of all dynamics. Most students live close to the school and can easily access the routes. Out of town parents are offered the convenience of dropping their kids on the route instead of driving all the way to the school.
- **At-Risk Children** – Could the WSB be a positive influence for at-risk kids? Would human service agencies help promote it to families they work with?
- **Physically Active Families** – Would it be productive to target physically active families who are BTC and YMCA members, or whose children participate in sports? Would this marketing emphasis be a disservice to the mission by leaving out the children who need the WSB the most, or would it just be the easiest way to achieve the “critical mass” that would help make the WSB “cool” and more fun which would draw a wide variety of kids?

Messages

Some parents may be strongly motivated by a message referencing studies documenting the link between physical activity and school performance. It is more compelling to emphasize the WSB as more

fun, and a socially/emotionally healthier environment compared to riding the school bus. Some parents with older children may be motivated by the opportunity for their child to have the experience of being a role model and an assistant chaperone for younger children.

In developing messages, there are many resources on the web – SRTS, WSB, Annual Walk to School Day, etc. – with good marketing themes, language and messages already developed by organizations with far more resources than BTC. One good example is the “Our Story” page on the national partnership website <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/who-we-are/our-story>.

Because the WSB mission fits so well within BTC’s mission, and because BTC will continue to gain prominence in the community over the next five years, it will benefit both BTC and the WSB for WSB marketing efforts to include references to BTC. The WSB program should emphasize that it is part of BTC because of BTC’s commitment to healthy lifestyles and a walkable community.

Outreach Strategies

Outreach strategies connect appropriate messages with the target audiences. A variety of strategies are discussed in detail in the sections below and include working with the school and partner organizations, using the web and social media, and using incentives to get kids to try the WSB.

Volunteer Recruitment

Recruiting and maintaining a strong core of volunteers is important for sustaining the WSB Program and preventing burnout among long time volunteers. A larger group of volunteers can also help get the word out about the program. Following are some volunteer recruitment ideas

- Explore whether local non-profits, human service agencies, churches, and businesses could potentially provide or help recruit volunteers.
- Explore whether students in the UMW early childhood development program would be interested in helping.
- Explore whether other UMW student organizations would be good matches for recruiting volunteers.
- Explore strategies for recruiting retired people in the community.
- Recruit through announcements in BTC member communications.
- Explore whether local businesses and partner organizations that support the program would be willing to offer perks such as gift cards for volunteers to boost morale and create an incentive to help recruit volunteers.

Leadership Development

Like most of BTC’s programs, the WSB currently depends on a very small number of leaders, making the program vulnerable if one of the current leaders needs to step down for any reason. The program’s long term sustainability and success will depend on developing enthusiastic volunteers into new leaders. A five-year goal for the program could be to work toward building a WSB Committee of five leaders with each taking lead responsibility for at least one important task.

The following ideas could help build and strengthen the program’s volunteer team.

Create a Task List and Delegate Tasks

In addition to walking with students three mornings a week, the WSB Program has many tasks that could be delegated to volunteers. These tasks potentially include:

- Recruiting volunteers.
- Coordinating volunteers.
- Parent outreach.
- Student outreach.
- School outreach.
- Outreach to local businesses and partner organizations.
- Planning special events.
- Updating social media.
- Advocating for infrastructure needs.
- Etc.

Obviously, many of these tasks could be broken down further into many more tasks. For example, school outreach includes outreach to gym teachers, classroom teachers and the school administration. The WSB leaders could expand and refine this list into a comprehensive list of tasks for Fall and Spring, then consider which could be delegated and whether there are current volunteers who would be a good fit. Delegating some of these responsibilities could help develop additional leaders to share the workload.

What many of these tasks have in common is that they could be delegated to volunteers whose schedules or other circumstances prevent them from walking with the WSB. Thinking about the WSB volunteer team in broader terms that potentially includes people who may never actually walk with students could greatly expand the pool of people who are recruited as WSB volunteers. Finally, a bigger team of volunteers would not only spread the workload; it would also create a larger group of people who could network to find new volunteers who *are* available to walk with the WSB.

Hold Volunteer Events

In addition to the luncheon at the beginning of the Fall and Spring seasons, BTC could hold a WSB thank-you event/party for volunteers near the end of each season. It would probably be important to hold these events a few weeks before the end of each season, because with the holiday season at the end of the Fall, and families leaving on vacation at the end of the Spring, it might be difficult to get much participation if the event is held after the end of the WSB season.

The event could be designed to achieve several objectives. Some of the following elements could also be incorporated into the luncheons at the beginning of the season:

- Celebrate everyone's contributions to build team spirit and a sense of community within the program.
- Get feedback on what went well during the season and what could be improved.
- Discuss the task list for the next season and recruit volunteers for different tasks.
- Brainstorm ideas for recruiting student participants, promoting the program, fun ideas for celebrity Fridays, etc.

Working with Parkview Elementary School

The program's relationship with Parkview Elementary School is essential to its success. WSB leaders currently work with the school to promote the program, and have identified additional ideas for coordination and promotion.

Current Outreach and Coordination

- At the start of the Fall and Spring seasons, the WSB Program produces a flyer and the elementary school distributes it to every child.
- WSB leaders have met with the principal, and are exploring opportunities to work with physical education classes to recognize or reward and encourage kids who walk to school.
- The school recognizes National Walk to School Day every year in October. Actively promoting this event in coordination with the school could help increase awareness and participation in the WSB.

Ideas for Expanding Outreach and Coordination

- **Flyers Targeting Families Beyond Current Routes** – One of the best audiences for expanding the program could be families living in areas where it is too far to walk or infrastructure barriers prevent walking. The program could try flyers and potentially other outreach strategies promoting the convenience, health and academic benefits, and fun of dropping students off to join the WSB. This strategy could include:
 - Ensuring that the routes both have good drop off locations for parents driving their kids, and ensuring that those locations could handle a higher volume of drop-offs.
 - Designing the start-of-season flyers to include a prominent pitch targeted directly to these families.
 - Exploring whether the school would be willing to mail a promotional post card, and whether BTC could secure funding for it, to families living in neighborhoods west of Atlantic and outside city limits.
- **Targeting Families Close to School** – Families living in the neighborhoods close to the school are the most obvious target. They are also likely to be cheaper and easier to reach. Explore strategies such as a geographically targeted post card mailing, through which the school and BTC could collaborate to reach these families.
- **Teachers** – Conduct outreach to teachers to identify whether there are some who are particularly interested in working with the program, and explore ways to collaborate. For example, an art teacher might collaborate on a kids' art project that could be used for t-shirt, posters or other promotional items, or they could help with creation of a big display for "Walking to Disneyland" or "Walking with Lewis and Clark". The following bullet suggests several integrated curriculum ideas .
- **Integrated Curriculum** – Work with teachers to explore "integrated curriculum" opportunities involving the WSB.
 - Math lessons involving the number of miles walked and number of kids.
 - Creative writing about things kids see on walk to school or the experience of walking in different seasons, etc.
 - A history lesson similar to the "walking to Disneyland" concept. Track WSB mileage relative to Lewis and Clark's journey across Montana and highlight key points in the journey as the WSB reaches each point. This could even be tied to a special field trip to the High Trails to observe plants, animals and the "Beaverhead" landmark noted in Lewis and Clark's journals.

- **Milestones Visual Display** – Post a large map in a prominent location in the school and track the WSB’s progress on a trip to Disneyland or retracing Lewis and Clark’s journey across Montana, the most common pioneers’ route across the state, etc.
- **Parents Council** – Give a presentation to the Parents Council and explore opportunities for collaboration and ways they could support or help promote the WSB. The Parents Council could potentially help with recruiting volunteers.
- **Counselors** – Explore with school counselors whether there are at-risk kids who could benefit and strategies for encouraging their participation.
- **Email List** – Does the school send out emails with announcements that could occasionally include information about the WSB?

Incentives / Perks

In the past, the WSB has worked with the YMCA to offer discounted swimming passes for participants. The program could explore other incentives such as gift cards with local businesses and organizations. Incentives would probably be most effective at getting kids to try the WSB for the first time if they were arranged before the start of the season, and a simple marketing plan was developed to promote them.

Free WSB T-shirts would potentially be a good incentive because they would accomplish the added benefit of advertising the program. However, they have to be cool enough for kids to want to wear them.

The program could create “frequency cards” with boxes on one side for walking volunteers to initial, and a description of one or more incentives available to kids who walk certain numbers of days. Because the cards would be very cheap to produce, instead of giving them to kids who showed up for the WSB, they could simply be widely distributed by the school and partner organizations to tempt kids to try the WSB.

Additional Collaborative Marketing Ideas

There may be a variety of opportunities to collaborate with other local non-profits, human service agencies, businesses, churches, etc. to help increase awareness and participation in the WSB.

- **Hospital/Pediatricians** – The program’s healthy lifestyle mission is a perfect fit with the community’s health care providers. Additionally, the WSB’s target audiences are “captive audiences” when they are visiting the doctor. WSB leaders could conduct outreach to pediatricians to make them aware of the program, and could create a flyer that doctors could hand out to families, make available in their waiting rooms, or post on their walls.
- **Popular Activities** – WSB leaders could network with parents and others to identify popular activities that elementary school children participate in and the organizations that run those activities. The program could conduct outreach to those organizations to explore opportunities to collaborate to promote the WSB.
- **Making the WSB Fun** – The program will continue to work with partner organizations in the community to make the WSB fun and interesting through events such as Celebrity Fridays with team mascots, fire fighters, Smokey Bear, etc.
- **Hikes** – The WSB Program could work with BTC’s High Trails Program to offer occasional after-school or weekend hikes for WSB participants. Some hikes could be offered for kids and their families, which would help build a sense of community around the program. Other hikes could be kids’ hikes with qualified leaders, which could be an incentive for parents who would be excited at the

opportunity to send their child off on a fun, healthy, no-cost activity. An obvious benefit for BTC would be to increase community awareness and enthusiasm for the High Trails Project.

Route Changes and New Routes

Over the next five years, the program may want to consider route changes or even route additions.

- WSB leaders have discussed modifying the existing routes to improve efficiency – for example, including the yellow apartments. If the walk were a little shorter more kids might participate because they could start a little later.
- If the program decides to try promotional strategies targeting parents who would be dropping their children off by car, the routes should be carefully assessed to ensure that they include good drop-off points.
- The program could identify infrastructure improvements both large and small – such as completing small sidewalk gaps or creating a safe crossing on Atlantic St. – that could make it possible to improve existing routes or even create a new route. Adding a route that crosses Atlantic could be an ambitious five-year goal.
- A five-year goal could be to work with BTC’s In-Town Trails and Bicycle Recycling programs, as well as other community partners on a two-stage campaign to, (1) improve infrastructure to create a safe biking route to the elementary and middle schools, and (2) recruit volunteers and participants and launch a bicycle train route. This could be a great strategy for highlighting in-town bicycle infrastructure needs, and could be a first step to build momentum toward broader improvements throughout the community.

Media

BTC regularly uses the local media to help market its projects and events. Media coverage is free advertising that generally requires only a modest time investment.

- **Local Newspaper** – The Dillon Tribune runs articles and announcements related to BTC activities. The WSB could send summary statistics at the beginning and end of every season along with a paragraph or two about the program and highlights about events like celebrity Fridays.
- **Local Radio** – WSB leaders can do interviews with the local radio station.

Fundraising

While the WSB has very limited expenses, some fundraising might be needed to increase the marketing budget to implement strategies such as producing and mailing post cards, and creating t-shirts. A well-publicized fundraising event would have the added benefits of increasing awareness of the program, as well as offering another opportunity for volunteers aren’t able to walk with the students. However, fundraising for marketing could be a hard sell. It might be easier to fundraise for an end-of-season celebration party or outing for WSB participants, list t-shirts and “getting the word out” as secondary fundraising goals, and try to raise enough for the whole package.

Safe Routes to School

Maintaining and growing the WSB Program could potentially help to leverage funding for SR2S infrastructure projects. Participation statistics could help with grant applications, and the WSB could

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also be used as a vehicle for increasing awareness of, and building support to address infrastructure barriers to safe routes to school and safe walking in the community.

Over the next several years, the WSB and In-Town Trails programs should discuss whether to pursue permitting and funding for SRTS infrastructure projects, and what roles each program would play in those efforts.