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Safe Routes project aims to educate students, drivers

By Jodi Heckel

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The young woman on the cell phone didn't even slow down as she passed Bottenfield Elementary School, even though the crossing guard was already in the middle of Prospect Avenue.

She drove past the school, easily going faster than 20 mph, said Bottenfield parent Leeann Stack, who watched the woman continue her conversation as she drove past the crossing guard last week.

"She was just oblivious," Stack said.

The incident was not unusual. Rose Hudson, the crossing guard at the school's dismissal time and co-chair of the Champaign-Urbana Safe Routes to School Project, regularly sees drivers going too fast through the school zone. Others drive past even when she's out in the street with her flags.

"They're looking down at their phones. They're just zoning," Hudson said. "They don't see me and the orange that is everywhere."

Crossing Prospect Avenue was identified as the worst problem for children walking or biking to school in Champaign in a Safe Routes to School report released in the spring. Students on their way to Bottenfield or South Side elementary schools face heavy traffic, speeding cars and drivers not yielding at the crosswalks, the report states.

In Urbana, the hot spot is the intersection of Oregon and Vine streets, where some Leal Elementary School students cross. The report identified the same problems, along with the lack of a crossing guard. The Urbana police reinstated a crossing guard at that intersection this school year.

The Safe Routes to School Project plans to increase its efforts to teach kids about safety and make adults aware of the need to be cautious in school zones. The project received a \$62,000 grant for this school year from the Federal Highway Administration – more than double what it received last year.

The plans include a "walking school bus," to be piloted at King Elementary School in Urbana. Adults would chaperone children on their walk to school, and there would be a set schedule for stops along the route.

Hudson said she's had difficulty finding parent volunteers, so she's hoping to recruit some University of Illinois students and start a walking school bus once a week or once every couple of weeks.

She started a frequent walker program last year at Carrie Busey and Robeson elementary schools in Champaign. The schools incorporated the program into P.E. class or recess, and the children earn tokens in the shape of a foot for their miles walked. Plans include expanding the program to other schools.

Hudson also helped Robeson and Kenwood Elementary School design a park and walk program, as part of revamped traffic



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Crossing guard Rose Hudson holds up traffic as Leeann Stack walks son Alex and her dog, Isis, across the street near Bottenfield Elementary School in Champaign.

flow patterns at the schools. She talked with parents about places they could park away from the school and walk their children a block or two to the building. It not only lets the kids get some exercise, it reduces traffic congestion around the school, she said.

She is working with Barkstall on a park and walk plan this year.

The project will continue its billboard campaign and there may be radio and TV spots and ads in movie theaters as well. It will also continue its crossing guard appreciation program, bicycle rodeos that teach safety, and its Walk and Bike to School Day events, scheduled for Oct. 7.

Hudson and Cynthia Hoyle, also a co-chair of the project, hope to get health professionals involved in their efforts, to provide a focus on the health benefits of an active lifestyle.

Hoyle believes the project's efforts have raised awareness in the cities of walkers and bikers.

"It is about getting people to stop and think," she said.

They work closely with Champaign and Urbana police, who step up their patrols in school zones at the start of the school year.

The Champaign Police Department assigns officers to school zones to monitor traffic every morning and afternoon during the school year, said Deputy Chief Holly Nearing, with a particular focus on schools along University, Prospect and Kirby avenues.

The city of Urbana received a grant last year to replace all its school zone signs, and the grant also paid for four of the large speed readout signs that are placed in school zones when the school year begins.

Urbana police are also re-examining the locations of crossing guards in school zones, said police Lt. Anthony Cobb.

The lack of crossing guards in some areas was one of the concerns cited in the Safe Routes to School report.

The report compiled parent surveys from 2004, 2006 and 2007 on how their children get to school, parents' perceptions of how walker- and biker-friendly the routes to schools are, and the problems they see that affect whether they let their children walk or bike to school. The Safe Routes to School project contracted with the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission to compile the report.

Along with speeding traffic, the most frequently mentioned concern in the report was infrastructure problems, such as broken sidewalks or no sidewalks.

Mickey Gilbert walks her daughter, first-grader Ashley, to and from Leal almost every day. They live a few blocks from the school and missed only two days of walking last year.

"Other than the bad sidewalk, it's a good walk," Gilbert said.

The sidewalk along Oregon Street between Broadway and Race gets "sloshy and yucky" when it rains, and it can be a minefield of ice in the winter, because there is a vacant house in that block and so the sidewalk next to it is never shoveled, she said.

Even so, she enjoys the chance to get outside with her children.

"It's a wonderful advantage to be able to walk to school. That's what we like about Leal," Gilbert said, adding that the walk home often includes impromptu play dates at Carle Park.

About a third of Urbana parents who responded to the surveys said their children walked to school, while 13.5 percent of Champaign parents surveyed said their children walked. Many Champaign children may not go to the school closest to their homes and so live too far away to walk. Champaign's Schools of Choice system allows families to request which elementary school they want their children to attend.

The top way children in both Champaign and Urbana get to school is by car, according to the report. In Champaign, 61 percent of those surveyed take their children to school in the family car, and nearly 40 percent of Urbana parents who were surveyed do so.

Biking to school was the least-used way to get to school in both districts, according to the survey, with just 1.4 percent of Champaign children and 2.3 percent of Urbana children riding their bikes.

The goal of the project is to increase walking to school by 5 percent and biking to school by 1 percent in the next two years.

Although it sounds counterintuitive, Hoyle said, the more children who are walking and biking to school, the safer they'll be, especially if there are sidewalks in good condition. That's because they'll be more visible and drivers will get used to watching for them and will expect children to be crossing streets near school zones, she said.

Stack walks her third-grade son, Alex, to Bottenfield most mornings. They cross Prospect Avenue, and Stack worries about drivers not paying attention.

"People just need to be aware when there's a school zone," she said.

On the Web

To read the Champaign-Urbana Safe Routes to School Project report or to find a safe walking route to your child's school, go to the C-U Safe Routes to School Web site at www.cu-srtsproject.com and click on the links on the home page for the report or walking routes.

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