

# Manitoba Kids on the Move

*ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION FOR  
CHILDREN'S HEALTH*

PRESENTATION TO THE MANITOBA

HEALTHY KIDS, HEALTHY FUTURES  
TASK FORCE

Resource Conservation Manitoba

January 11, 2005

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## ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH

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### SUMMARY

As a community organization that delivers programs encouraging children's physical activity, Resource Conservation Manitoba welcomes the creation and work of this task force. We see this as a sign that all members of the Legislature are committed to the well-being of children and the health of the communities in which they live. Because RCM works specifically in the area of active transportation, that will be the focus of our recommendations. Our three main points can be summarized as follows:

1. Active transportation offers a practical and available means by which we as Manitobans can help children improve their physical fitness and incorporate healthy activity into their daily lives. Simply, we need to make it possible for kids to walk or cycle safely in the community, instead of being driven in a motor vehicle.
2. A variety of tools and resources for active transportation exist right now in Manitoba. RCM organizes both elementary-level walk-to-school programs and also student-led trip reduction programs at the secondary school level. As well, we offer support and resources for transportation demand management at workplaces. Thousands of Manitobans across the province are participating, and we see great potential for further implementation and expansion of these successful efforts.
3. Finally, and not least, let's please look at how our communities are designed and built. Let's not force people into cars in order to get to school, work, shopping, and recreation because of the absence of alternatives. Active modes of transportation need to be practical, safe and convenient. We need to design and build pedestrian-friendly and cycling-friendly neighbourhoods that don't put barriers in the way of healthy physical activity for kids. Transportation infrastructure and community design are critically important means by which decision-makers can support the incorporation of healthy physical activity into people's daily lives.

### ABOUT RESOURCE CONSERVATION MANITOBA

Resource Conservation Manitoba is a non-profit, non-governmental organization and a registered charity. RCM was founded in 1985 as the Recycling Council of Manitoba. In the early days, we piloted recycling depots and advocated waste reduction at the community and provincial levels. In 1996, recognizing a need to move beyond recycling, the members of the Recycling Council changed the name of the organization to Resource Conservation Manitoba, and pledged the 'reinvented' RCM to public education on ecological sustainability. While retaining a long-standing commitment to waste reduction, RCM has in recent years also undertaken projects on climate change and sustainable transportation.

We operate a Compost Action Project that promotes composting throughout Manitoba, an Environmental Speakers Bureau that delivers classroom presentations on resource conservation topics, and an annual Waste Reduction Week each October. In the area of active transportation, RCM co-ordinates the annual Commuter Challenge, International Walk to School Week, and a Clean Air Day Walk to School. This spring, we are about to launch Walking Wednesdays clubs at elementary schools across the province and we will be piloting a Manitoba Student Transportation Network promoting active transportation at five secondary schools. Also, we are supporting employee transportation surveys and workplace program design with four employers, and are preparing a revised and updated toolkit of 'green commuting' resources to bring these services to a wider constituency.

We are pleased to be the organization that has pioneered these programs in our province – working on the ground to find out what is appropriate for our communities, and developing “made-in-Manitoba” materials for schools and workplaces. We have brought together a partnership of health agencies, fitness organizations, educators, employers, environmental groups and government to advise on program delivery. RCM is part of a Canada-wide network on active transportation through Go for Green, a national non-profit organization that promotes healthy lifestyles. We might add that RCM was especially gratified to receive an award of distinction from the Manitoba Public Health Association in 2002 in recognition of our active transportation programs.

#### **WHAT IS ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION?**

Active transportation means any self-propelled mode of travel that gets you where you want to go. This includes walking, jogging, cycling, in-line skating, wheelchairs, skate-boarding, even canoeing and kayaking. In the winter months, it can also include skating, skiing, and snowshoeing. If you are traveling from 'A' to 'B' under your own steam, you are engaging in active transportation.

RCM sees a clear connection between the habits of our car-centred culture and the declining state of our children's health. We are not going to dwell at length on this point because it seems reasonably self-evident. The discussion document prepared by the Task Force cites a number of indicators of declining child health and notes the increased use of motorized transportation. Along with structured opportunities for fitness instruction in schools and community recreation programs, the promotion of active transportation is one more tool that is available to increase kids' activity levels and improve their health.

It is not RCM's position that riding in a car automatically and inevitably makes people unfit. But riding in a car instead of choosing a more active form of transportation means we are losing an opportunity to build healthy activity into our own and our children's everyday lives. RCM is pleased to see the recognition on the part of the Task Force that healthy living needs to be integrated into daily living. Active modes of transportation need to become taken for granted -- how we normally get around on a regular basis.

#### **ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

As an environmental organization, Resource Conservation Manitoba came to active transportation from the perspective of ecological sustainability. Getting people to leave their cars at home seemed like a good way to reduce air pollution from vehicle exhaust and to lower

emissions of the greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. It does have those results, but we quickly realized that there are a host of other outstanding benefits including improved fitness, better individual and community health, less traffic congestion, cost saving, and stronger, more vibrant communities. Many national organizations, including Go for Green and the Green Communities Association, along with community health groups (including the Physical Activity Coalition of Manitoba) have identified the important role active transportation can play in creating healthier communities.

For children, the active modes of transportation that are most likely to be practical and available are walking and cycling. And the destination to and from which most travel occurs for children is the school. In some US jurisdictions, as many as 85 per cent of kids are driven to school.<sup>1</sup> A 1998 Environics national survey of children's travel choices found that 36 per cent of Canadian kids normally walk to school.<sup>2</sup> That's a few years ago, but we suspect the situation is worse in 2005, given the trends to suburban school construction and to consolidated megaschools that are not within walking distance of where families live.<sup>3</sup>

Rates for active travel to school are far below potential in Manitoba's largest urban centre. An October 2004 survey conducted by Ruth Marr and Associates for the City of Winnipeg indicated that almost half of respondents report that they either drive their children or their children drive themselves alone to school.<sup>4</sup>

RCM's work in the area of active transportation has focused on three areas: workplaces, elementary schools, and secondary schools. In regard to children and youth, programs include:

- Active and Safe Routes to School: We work with parents, kids and schools to support children walking to school safely under adult supervision. This involves education, a safety audit or 'walkabout' of the neighbourhood with a police officer or other traffic expert, route mapping, and recruitment and orientation of volunteers. A group of kids walking together with an adult is a "walking school bus." RCM's aim is not to run walking school buses ourselves, but to provide the tools and resources so that parent groups and schools can establish these for themselves. We have found that some groups are not in a position to do this every day, so we are about to launch a province-wide Walking Wednesdays Club to support a once-a-week effort. Variations could include Toboggan Tuesdays or Footloose Fridays. We piloted Walking Wednesdays with 20 classes last spring, and can report that there is much enthusiasm for the concept among students, parents and teachers.
- Clean Air Day Walk to School: Environment Canada has identified Wednesday of Environment Week each June as Clean Air Day. We encourage schools to participate in this event as a way of generating interest and profile for walking at their school. Some 8,000 students from 40 elementary and middle schools in Winnipeg participated in the 2004 Clean Air Day "Walk and Roll to School" event.
- International Walk to School Week: This growing international event takes place in early October. In all, about 3-million walkers in 36 countries participated in International Walk to School Week in October 2004. In Manitoba, some 30,000 students at 106 schools took part. These included schools in Winnipeg -- like Ecole Julie-Riel, George McDowell, Ryerson, Dalhousie, Montrose, and Robert H. Smith -- as well as schools in Fisher Branch, Gimli, Sanford, St. Pierre, Brandon, Thompson, Dauphin, and other centres

throughout the province. Again, from RCM's perspective, we follow-up with the Manitoba schools to encourage and support a further commitment to active transportation.

- Commuter Challenge: While the annual Commuter Challenge is directed primarily to workplaces, we also encourage participation by schools, and a number of high schools have registered and taken part. The Challenge is seen by many as a Winnipeg event, but in fact we had participants who registered in 16 communities outside Winnipeg in 2004.
- Off Ramp Manitoba: Our main active transportation program for secondary school youth has been modeled on a program called "Off Ramp," developed by colleagues at Better Environmentally Sound Transportation ([www.best.bc.ca](http://www.best.bc.ca)) in BC. RCM piloted the program at five high schools this past year, and we have found that there is a great deal of interest in transportation alternatives among young Manitobans. It is a challenging constituency to work with, given that many young people are also eagerly anticipating owning their first car. But there is also a high level of social and environmental awareness among students, and we see exciting potential for a Manitoba Student Transportation Network to support student-led efforts to address these issues with their peers.

As noted, our services for workplaces aim to encourage employees to choose environmentally friendly means of commuting. We mention this as a relevant initiative because we have found there is a relationship between how adults get to work and how kids get to school. A survey of Winnipeg participants following the 2001 Commuter Challenge revealed that one of the main reasons people drive to work is because of family obligations, including dropping children off at school – an example of how adult travel patterns can affect children's transportation choices.

There are, of course, barriers that prevent kids and families from making different choices. In 2003, RCM commissioned a survey of studies looking at Active and Safe Routes to School.<sup>5</sup> This was not a field study; it was a review of the literature on social, environmental and health issues concerning the transportation behaviour of children and families. To summarize, our review found that the main reasons why kids do not walk to school include the following:

- the school is too far away
- traffic speeds and congestion make walking and cycling unsafe
- there is concern for children's personal safety
- it is more convenient for parents to drop kids off on their drive to work.

Programs like ASRTS address some of these concerns by providing kids with a safe walk to school under adult supervision. In general, we feel that children under the age of nine require adult accompaniment on the journey to school. However, in the case of school location and traffic congestion, we have to look beyond the family for solutions. An approach from the perspective of sustainability means we need to consider the multiple connections and interdependencies that link health, fitness, environment, community design, social values, and travel behaviour.

#### **LET'S MAKE MANITOBA A LEADER IN ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION FOR THE HEALTH OF KIDS AND COMMUNITIES**

In the time available, we can only touch on some of the wealth of opportunities that exist to encourage safe and active transportation for people of all ages. RCM's own experience since 1998 and research carried out elsewhere point to solutions that variously involve traffic and

street engineering, bylaw enforcement, general and sectoral education, policy-making, and community planning.<sup>6</sup>

## PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- People may choose to live in locations where active transportation is available and practical for the whole family. If there are no sidewalks and if the nearest convenience store is more than a kilometer away, we have created quite a challenge in overcoming auto-dependency. We can keep family transportation needs in mind when making a rental or purchase decision.
- If there are barriers in the neighbourhood where we now live, we can join with others in working toward solutions. This may mean having sidewalks installed or repaired; traffic calming on busy residential streets; identification of safety hazards in the neighbourhood; signage; volunteering to walk with a group of kids once a week or once a month; and taking our concerns to decision-makers at all levels.
- Let's teach our kids safe walking and cycling, remembering that children under the age of nine are not developmentally able to make safety judgments on their own.
- We can actively support schools in their efforts to deal with traffic congestion and parking issues.
- We need to model the behaviour by walking, cycling, and taking transit ourselves not just on special occasions, but as part of everyday travel. A US survey of household travel found that a typical household makes about 3,500 trips annually for work, school, shopping, recreation, visiting and personal reasons.<sup>7</sup> Over 86 per cent of these trips are by motor vehicle.<sup>8</sup> At least some of these could be opportunities to make health-friendly transportation choices. The recent active transportation survey in Winnipeg found that eight Winnipeggers in 10 drive at least some of the time when making short trips during the day, either to run errands or for work purposes. Two-thirds of survey respondents report driving alone as the method used most often to commute to work. But almost seven adult Winnipeggers in 10 claim to incorporate cycling, walking, in-line skating, or other modes of active transportation into their regular routine at some level.<sup>9</sup> In other words, there is potential here for working with employers to make active transportation an available choice for employees. Again, RCM has resources that can help workplaces establish trip reduction programs.

## MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS

- Ongoing enforcement of existing speed limits, crosswalks, stop signs, diamond lanes and safety laws would improve conditions for walking and cycling for everyone.<sup>10</sup> Local governments can work with schools to establish routes and safety protocols that take into account vehicle traffic, garbage truck schedules, and snow removal equipment. They can implement traffic calming measures to reduce vehicle volumes and speeds, improve the visibility of pedestrians, and put a priority on kids' safety. Signs visible to drivers could clearly identify school routes.
- Municipalities should incorporate active transportation principles in standards for community design. We need to see planning standards that make it safe, easy, attractive

and convenient for people to walk and cycle. In larger centres, local governments can make transit a priority. Communities of any size can make bike paths, walkability, and sidewalks a priority. Housing subdivisions with no sidewalks, big box developments that depend on cars, lack of cycling routes, and infrequent transit are barriers to active transportation. Compact design with ready access to a mix of housing, stores and services promotes walkability. Communities where there is abundant street-level presence of people are safer and more socially cohesive than car-dependant communities where people don't know their neighbours. In short, sprawl is hazardous to social, environmental and physical health.<sup>11</sup>

- Local governments can model support for active transportation in their role as employer, and they can encourage businesses and institutions in their community to adopt trip reduction programs. This will help make it possible for parents to choose active transportation, and that's how kids in the family will see first-hand the relevance and benefits of the practice.
- In the larger picture, active transportation is part of the responsibilities of local governments to community health, to action on greenhouse gas reduction and climate change, to fitness, and to ecological sustainability.

#### SCHOOL DIVISIONS

- School divisions in Manitoba can implement division-wide policies for active transportation, including safety audits of school locations; establishment of idle-free zones around schools; development of secure bicycle lock-up facilities; education of children, parents and teachers; recognition of participants; profile for programs in division publications; links to curriculum; and partnership with parent councils and community organizations.
- School divisions could establish budgets for Active and Safe Routes to School programs.

#### GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

- RCM would like to see the federal government provide dedicated support for active transportation infrastructure through new and existing federal-provincial-municipal agreements. Eligible projects would include pedestrian, cycling and transit improvements.
- When and if a portion of the federal gas tax is turned over to municipalities, at least half of it should be earmarked for sustainable transportation. One guideline might be 40 per cent to public transit and 10 per cent to active transportation, in line with average current modal uses.
- Federal departments can support education for sustainability through ongoing, multi-year partnerships with community organizations that are active on the ground with programs of demonstrated value.

#### PROVINCE OF MANITOBA

- RCM would like to acknowledge a commendable commitment on the part of the Province of Manitoba to children's health and active transportation. Not only has the Premier

established this all-party committee, but RCM also greatly appreciates the support of the Department of Energy, Science and Technology for our sustainable transportation programs, described earlier. Through these initiatives, RCM is working to encourage active transportation at schools and workplaces in communities across the province. The support of the Government of Manitoba will allow thousands more Manitoba children to participate in these healthful programs.

- Having said that, you won't be surprised if we observe that there is much more to do. RCM would like to see the Government put legislative authority behind a set of policies that would require design and infrastructure for active and sustainable transportation in land use planning. Our collective hand-wringing over the state of children's health will seem a little hollow if we continue to permit sprawling development in which, and to which, active transportation is structurally impossible.
- RCM would like to see the Province's own support for municipal transportation infrastructure in Manitoba recognize the multiple benefits of active and sustainable transportation. Active transportation requirements should be central in any new urban transportation infrastructure programs supported by the Government of Manitoba.
- As of 2003, nine US states have formally mandated Active and Safe Routes to School programs of various kinds. California has allocated some \$20-million annually for sidewalk and street improvements near schools. Oregon requires that municipalities and schools work together to identify barriers that prevent kids from walking to school. In Texas, a "Safe Routes to School Act" was passed in 2001, directing the state Transportation Department to install sidewalks, bike lanes, and crosswalks, and to identify safety hazards on school routes. RCM would welcome a corresponding commitment in Manitoba.
- As an employer, the Government of Manitoba and its departments have an opportunity to support employees who want to put active transportation into practice. RCM is happy to make our green commuting resources freely available to the Province, as they are to other workplaces across Manitoba.
- All Members of the Legislature can exercise environmental leadership on these issues. RCM encourages schools that participate in International Walk to School Week to invite their local MLA to take part in a walk. We hope you and your colleagues will respond positively when you receive such an invitation. And we would hope to have the support of all Members for on-going active transportation programs beyond once-a-season walk to school events, to build healthy activity into the daily lives of Manitoba's children year-round.

#### **IN CONCLUSION**

All of us who are involved in planning for the transportation of children and youth will do well to consult with kids themselves. They are a great source of first-hand insight into the benefits of, and barriers to, active transportation. For example, the Ontario Walkability Study found that about 3.5 per cent of students regularly ride their bikes to school. But when asked, seven times that number -- about 27 per cent of survey respondents -- said they would like to cycle to school. We at RCM have received invaluable input on program design and delivery from high school students, when we have asked them to share their experiences and ideas for making active transportation possible and popular among their peers. We need to listen to the voices of young Manitobans.

Certainly, families and kids should receive whatever information and support they need to make healthful diet and exercise choices. But children's health issues should not be framed as just a matter of individual and family responsibility, as though there is no connection between car-centred communities and bad air, sick kids, unfit kids, unsafe streets, injuries, and overweight. It makes good sense to foster children's health by investing in community infrastructure and educational programs that make daily physical activity available and safe for kids through active transportation.

We wish the members of the Task Force every success as we all work together to build sustainable communities and develop active transportation for a healthy future.

Thank you.

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*January 2005*

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Appleyard, B. (2003). *Planning safe routes to school*. Planning, May, pp. 34-37.

<sup>2</sup> cited in O'Brien, Catherine (2001). *Ontario Walkability Study. Trip to School: Children's Experiences and Aspirations*. Toronto: York Centre for Applied Sustainability, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> see Beaumont, C. and E. Pianca (2002). *Why Johnny Can't Walk to School: Historic Neighborhood Schools in the Age of Sprawl*. Washington, DC: national Trust for Historic Preservation

<sup>4</sup> PRA Inc (2004). *Active Transportation in Winnipeg*. Report of a telephone survey prepared for Marr Consulting as part of the City of Winnipeg Active Transportation Study. The final report of the study will be available early in 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Dudley, Michael (2003). *Literature Review for Resource Conservation Manitoba's "Safe, Active, Green and Easy Ways to School" Program (SAGE)*. Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg. (unpublished report)

<sup>6</sup> see Transportation Alternatives (2002). *The 2002 Summary of Safe Routes to School Programs in the United States*. New York: Transportation Alternatives.

<sup>7</sup> Hu, Pat S. and Timothy R. Reuscher (December 2004). *Summary of Travel Trends: 2001 National Household Travel Survey*. Washington, DC: US Department of Transportation, p. 15

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 19

<sup>9</sup> see PRA (2004). Note that although the results of the phone survey are final, the report of the overall Active Transportation Study has not been finalized at this date.

<sup>10</sup> For a perspective on walkable communities, see Burden, Dan. "How can I find and help build a walkable community?" ([www.walkable.org](http://www.walkable.org))

<sup>11</sup> see, for example, SmartGrowth BC web site (<http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/index.cfm>)