

July 13, 2011

Newton County Receives \$316,700 Grant for Safe Routes to School Infrastructure Project

Newton County has been selected as one of two counties in Georgia's 7th Congressional District to receive funding for a federal Safe Routes to School (SRTS) infrastructure project proposal submitted by the Newton County Board of Commissioners and the Newton County School System last fall. In November the Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to submit the application on behalf of the school system and to have their engineering department work with the Georgia Department of Transportation, which will oversee construction of the project.

Safe Routes to School is a federally funded, national program to reduce congestion, improve safety and promote the health and well-being of children by enabling and encouraging them to walk and bicycle to school. With the support of parents, schools, community members and government, the program evaluates school area environments; conducts activities; and funds projects that improve safety and reduce traffic and air pollution in the surrounding community - making walking and bicycling to school a safer and more appealing transportation option.

Rudy Bowen, Georgia Transportation Board Chairman and representative from the 7th District announced the grant award of \$316,700 for SRTS projects at Fairview Elementary School, Live Oak Elementary, West Newton Elementary, Clements Middle School and Veterans Middle School to enhance walking and bicycling opportunities for students.

"SRTS is a worthwhile program from many perspectives," Mr. Bowen commented. "It can reduce those aggravating and pollution-generating waits to drop off or pick up children and at the same time, help our children stay safe, active and physically fit."

The five schools included in the proposal are all members of the Safe Routes to School Resource Center and participated in International Walk to School Month last October. Because of current unsafe conditions for walking and biking, however, walking activities, including the establishment of walking clubs and a Saturday Walk-a-Thon, were held at each of the schools throughout the month. The schools were selected for infrastructure projects because of the large number of students who live near the schools: a total of 530 students live within ½ mile of the five schools, 869 within 1 mile, and 1989 within 1 ½ miles.

Infrastructure improvements will include the installation of bicycle racks, sidewalks, pedestrian crosswalks, warning signs, and In-road Warning Light Systems (IRWLS) for crosswalks on Fairview Road, Brown Bridge Road, and Kirkland Road. The IRWLS include high intensity, bi-directional in-pavement flashing lights, as well as pre-warning flashing LED signs to prepare motorists to stop for pedestrians in crosswalks. Once activated by a pushbutton at either curb, rapidly flashing lights are emitted in both directions. The Georgia Department of Transportation will employ a project engineer for final design of the project and will let bids and oversee all infrastructure construction. It will probably be some time before the work is actually completed, but the first hurdle has been cleared with funding (\$316,700) set aside for Newton County.

NCCS Grants Coordinator, Dr. Kathy Garber, explained that receiving funding for this project is the result of a truly collaborative effort that involved the Board of Commissioners, Newton County Public Works, the Sheriff's Department, the Center for Planning and Preservation, and teachers, principals and central office administrators from the school system. Dr. Garber said, "Hopefully, as infrastructures are put in place, more and more students will choose to walk or ride their bikes to school, not only to improve their own health and fitness, but to improve the air quality around their schools through a reduction of car and bus traffic in the area. If we can help make this happen, it will be a benefit to the entire community."
