



By Don Cross
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SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

A Phoenix Perspective

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL SAFE ROUTES PROGRAM



ABOUT ME

I served as the School Safety Coordinator for the City of Phoenix Street Transportation Department from 2005-2021. In this role, I also served as the Safe Routes to School Representative for the city as well. I wrote or was directly involved in nearly four million dollars of Safe Routes to School Grants the city received during that time. The grants were both infrastructure as well as non-infrastructure in nature. I retired from Phoenix in November of 2021 and now serve as the SRTS Specialist for Y2K Engineering.

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Safe Routes to School started informally in the United States in the 1990's as a series of projects a few cities tried to promote walking and biking to school. Safe Routes built momentum throughout America until 2005 when Congress approved one billion in funding to implement Safe Routes to School Programs across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. This funding allowed states to execute infrastructure and education improvements and programs to allow students better conditions for walking and biking to school.

HOW PHOENIX'S SAFE ROUTES PROGRAM STARTED

When I took over the program in 2005, the city was progressively working with schools to create Safe Routes to School walking plans and route maps before the national program was created. We also identified 2 schools a year as Walk to School Day Schools. The national program was implemented in 2007. This allowed Phoenix to apply for grants to improve infrastructure issues that impeded walking to school and also work with schools to apply for non-infrastructure education grants. These grants expanded what was possible for the city's Safe Routes to School Program.

PHOENIX'S WALK TO SCHOOL DAY EXPANDED

I made a decision in 2007 to expand our Walk to School Day Events for a few reasons. First, I wanted to expose as many of our schools as possible to the events. Second, I wanted school administrations to see how easy it is for students to walk to school and third, I could use the events as a way to identify infrastructure issues in neighborhoods and to see what type of non-infrastructure needs the schools have. Phoenix turned Walk to School Day from a one-day event in October to six weeks' worth of events running from the middle of September through the end of October. We created one of the largest programs in the country. 20,000 students would participate in Walk to School Day Walks and Assemblies each year.



BIKES AND BIKE TO SCHOOL DAY

Phoenix was one of the first cities to host Bike to School Day Events. The first one was in 2010 at Paseo Hills Elementary. We had over 250 riders including the Principal on a giant bike with motorcycle-style tires. Bike to School Day became a national event in 2012. Phoenix started to expand into bike education programs. This included grants from the Governor's Office of Highway Safety for bike helmets and the creation of bike safety comic books. I met with Phoenix Police and Fire safety education staff in 2012 and created a bike safety team. We started offering bike rodeos and expanding our outreach. In 2014, I approached the Phoenix City Council and we created the Phoenix Community Bike and Safety Events to have more community involvement in bikes and bike safety. By 2019, Phoenix held up to 60 bike events and handed out nearly 2,000 bike helmets each year.

INFRASTRUCTURE OR NON-INFRASTRUCTURE GRANTS:



WHICH COMES FIRST?

As I gathered data from the events, my first thought when it came to grants was infrastructure projects. Jurisdictions are always looking at their R-O-W areas to see what can be improved. When schools, school districts and other non-profits think of applying for grants, they tend to think of education and safety programs first. I have found over the years that an effective use of Safe Routes to School grant money is when a school location has both infrastructure and non-infrastructure grants (when it's called for). We aren't doing students and their families any favors by pouring grant money into non-infrastructure education programs while not improving the areas they have to walk or ride in. That also works in reverse when a city pours infrastructure grant money into a school neighborhood and doesn't coordinate with the school to determine what if any safety programs are being provided.

Infrastructure grant funds can be used for planning, design and construction of projects to improve walking or biking. This could mean the installation of sidewalks, the creation of a trail or traffic diversion improvements near a walking or biking path for a school. Many jurisdictions will apply for and receive these funds and often not work with the schools in the area to verify if safety programs are in place. The infrastructure project is where the grant process usually starts and ends. With 28 school districts, over 200 charter schools and 500 total K-12 schools in the City of Phoenix, coordination concerning safe routes was often difficult but very necessary.

Non-infrastructure funds can be used to provide education and encouragement programs to promote safe walking and biking to school. This could include awareness campaigns, setting-up trainings or providing traffic education and enforcement programs. School or school districts usually push for these types of grants first. In the beginning, Phoenix would partner with these schools or school districts to help them get these types of grants without a big review of the surrounding neighborhood. After a while, I would automatically look at what a possible infrastructure grant would look like if we worked with a school to get the non-infrastructure grant first. Education programs can only go so far if the surrounding infrastructure needs improvement.

INFRASTRUCTURE OR NON-INFRASTRUCTURE GRANTS: WHICH COMES FIRST? – IT DOESN'T MATTER WHICH ONE COMES FIRST AS LONG AS A SCHOOL AND JURISDICTION WORK TOGETHER TO GET BOTH (IF NEEDED).

ARE “CHAMPIONS” IMPORTANT IN THE PROCESS? WHO ARE THEY?

A “champion” is someone who goes above and beyond to work toward the implementation of Safe Routes to School Infrastructure and Non-Infrastructure programs. It could be a parent volunteer getting off work to lead a Walking School Bus. It could be a government worker who stays late to complete a grant to be submitted. It could be a Principal meeting with staff after school to set up a Safe Routes Program at the school. When Phoenix started submitting grants and expanding Safe Routes to School, we found a group of champions which turned into partnerships and eventually a Safe Routes to School committee. Hospitals wanted to be involved. John C Lincoln, Phoenix Children’s and St. Joe’s became part of the group. Police wanted to be involved. The Phoenix TESU or Traffic Education Safety Unit joined the group. Neighborhood Services in Phoenix wanted to be involved. Even Parks and Libraries wanted to be involved. We had created a nice coalition. Once the grants were in place, champions from the schools emerged. Laveen Elementary set up the first Safe Routes to School Club on campus. Champion staff members ran it and encouraged students to join. They would review how to improve walking and biking to school for their students. They would propose ideas to the Principal to implement to improve safety. Bethune Elementary created an after school bike club led by the Student Resource Officer from the school. The students learned about bike safety, got repairs done for their bikes and would have scheduled rides. The grants were the seed that allowed these outcomes to blossom.



THE FUTURE OF SAFE ROUTES IN PHOENIX

All the gains Phoenix had made with Safe Routes to School slowly disappeared starting in March of 2020 when Covid-19 struck. All the spring events that year had to be cancelled. That led to all of the fall Walk to School Day Events in 2020 not even being scheduled and nothing ended up being scheduled in 2021. Since I retired from the city, there haven't been any other champions that have stepped up as of now. That doesn't mean it will stay that way." With "The future of Safe Routes to School in Phoenix is unknown but there is potential for renewal of this important program. Y2K is working with the city's Street Transportation Department to develop a Road Safety Action Plan that may provide some guidance for future Safe Routes projects. Arizona State University's College of Health Solutions is looking at ways their program and students can help drive Safe Routes. These are all positive steps but ultimately the survival and expansion of Safe Routes to School in Phoenix hinges on the involvement of schools and the creation of champions at the school level. Hopefully these government champions emerge sooner rather than later." With "Other communities have found success through non-profit or consultant partners. Hopefully leadership continues to support Safe Routes to School programs and that champions emerge sooner rather than later.

