

HERE COMES THE WALKING SCHOOL BUS!

By Diane Trautman

Imagine an organized activity that would make it safer for your primary school child to walk to school, help him to socialize, and give her more exercise. Imagine also that this activity could save you time; save you money; and decrease the amount of traffic, air pollution and global warming gasses emitted around town. Wow, you'd say, where do I sign up?

At the moment, unfortunately, you can't. However, with a little organization from the local elementary school districts, and some advocacy from parents, the Santa Clarita Valley could host a thriving program called the Walking School Bus.

This is just what it sounds like: a walking "bus" of children, with an adult "driver" in the front and another "conductor" in the back, making its way through your neighborhood, stopping at your house and picking up your child, growing larger as it approaches the school. At the end of the day, children gather outside the school and reverse the route. Sound like fun? You bet. When researchers surveyed children already participating in this program in other cities, most kids say they like talking with their friends on the way to school. This is especially good for kids who are new to the area. Also, with child obesity rates hitting an all-time high (15% of American children aged 6 to 19 are considered overweight), you'd be doing them a favor by giving them an opportunity for more exercise.

The benefits to you as the parent are perhaps even more enjoyable. First, it attacks the number one complaint I hear from citizens in my role as a city planning commissioner: traffic. Less traffic around the school site also increases safety and means a reduction in the amount of greenhouse gasses emitted, and less air pollution in our valley. Also, it saves you time. Instead of throwing on your clothes and running out to the car in the morning, you can have that extra cup of coffee as your child eagerly awaits the "bus."

To start this program here in Santa Clarita, parents, site councils, PTAs, PTOs, and school districts would have to work together to create an interest survey, develop the bus routes, and create safety regulations. The result would be a program which makes our neighborhoods safe for our children and reinforces the connection among school, community, and the citizen.

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