



## S. 800

### The Safe Routes to School Reauthorization Bill: Helping America's Children Take Steps to a Safe and Healthy Future

On April 12, 2010, twelve Senators—led by Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA), Bernard Sanders (I-VT), and Jeff Merkley (D-OR)—joined together to introduce S. 800, the *Safe Routes to School Program Reauthorization Act*.

Created as part of the SAFETEA-LU transportation bill in 2005, the federal Safe Routes to School program (SRTS) provided over \$600 million from FY2005-2009 to State Departments of Transportation. Congress has extended the program at \$183 million per year starting in FY2010 until a long-term transportation reauthorization is complete. The bulk of these grants allow schools and communities to retrofit and build roads, sidewalks, bike lanes and pathways to allow children to more safely walk and bicycle to school. A smaller percentage of funding (10 to 30%) supports non-infrastructure activities, including walking and bicycling safety education, driver awareness campaigns, more robust enforcement of speed limits and traffic safety rules, promotional events to encourage more children to walk and bicycle, and more.

Safe Routes to School efforts are making it safer and more common for children to walk and bicycle to and from schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Just 13% of children walk or bicycle to school today, down from nearly 50% in 1969. Reversing that trend has far-reaching implications for helping communities address childhood obesity and physical inactivity, traffic safety and congestion, and air quality. In addition, with our difficult economic times, school districts that are cutting bus service are relying on Safe Routes to School to address safety concerns for the increased numbers of children walking and bicycling. *By improving the safety and prevalence of walking and bicycling to and from school, children and their communities benefit from reduced traffic congestion, better air quality, and healthier lifestyles.*

The Safe Routes to School program is due for reauthorization as part of the next transportation bill. S. 800 proposes to build on successes around the country and strengthen and expand the federal Safe Routes to School program. The bill would:

- Maintain Safe Routes to School as a standalone transportation program;
- Sustain funding at the FY09 level of \$183 million per year given high demand and need for the program;
- Add limited eligibility for high schools and bus stop safety;
- Improve project delivery and reduce overhead by addressing regulatory burden; and
- Add a research and evaluation component.

#### **S. 800 would retain the core structure of the existing federal Safe Routes to School program. Under the existing program:**

- Each state Department of Transportation (DOT) is required to appoint a full-time Safe Routes to School coordinator to administer the program.
- State DOTs receive an annual apportionment of SRTS funds based on the state's share of the overall population of school children. Between 70-90% of a state's funds must be used on infrastructure improvements like sidewalks, bike lanes and crosswalks, and the remaining 10-30% is for non-infrastructure activities including education, enforcement, encouragement and evaluation.
- The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) supports a SRTS Clearinghouse to disseminate best practices and provide technical assistance to state DOTs and local projects.

**The changes proposed by S. 800 would strengthen and expand the existing program:**

- *Sustain funding at the FY09 level of \$183 million per year given high demand and need for the program.* At the current funding level, demand is far exceeding available funding—there are three times as many applicants as awards and the funds requested is four times what is awarded. Cutbacks in bus transportation are increasing the pressure on Safe Routes to School. Less than 10% of schools nationwide will receive funding, and only for a portion of their needed upgrades and programming.
  - Set the annual authorization level for FY12 to FY16 at \$183 million, level with current funding.
  - Change the minimum state apportionment and administrative set-aside from a flat dollar amount to a percentage of the overall funding level [0.5% for minimum apportionment and 1.5% for administration].
  - Allow the Secretary to use up to 5% of the overall authorization to create an incentive fund to encourage states to add state funds to the federal SRTS funds.
- *Expand limited eligibility to all schools and to address bus stop safety for more rural communities.*
  - Allow high schools to participate in projects that also benefit elementary and middle schools.
  - Allow states to use up to 10% of infrastructure funding to improve bus stop safety.
- *Improve project delivery and reduce overhead by addressing regulatory burden.* Currently, even small projects are subject to the same rules and regulations as multi-million dollar highway projects, posing challenges and delays in implementing projects.
  - Exempt non-infrastructure projects from title 23 highway regulations.
  - Require the Secretary and State DOTs to use existing practices and precedents to improve infrastructure project delivery and reduce overhead.
  - Require FHWA to redistribute any funds that are not obligated by states within three years.
- *Add a research and evaluation component.* Currently, the Federal Highway Administration strongly encourages states to evaluate their projects, but does not require it.
  - Require the Secretary to develop and implement a comprehensive evaluation plan.
  - Add an administrative set aside of 1.5% for research and evaluation.
- *Make technical clarifications to align the statute with existing practice:*
  - Clarify that local SRTS managers and planning grants are eligible uses of funding.
  - Require states to ensure equitable distribution of funds to low-income communities and among urban, suburban, and rural districts.

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