

## Include walking, biking trails in school plans

As we work to obtain more resources to improve our congested and inadequate roads, I would like to urge support for alternative forms of transportation, especially to ensure that there are safe routes to get to our schools. Several weeks ago, I met with Monongalia County Schools Superintendent

Frank DeVono and Chet Parsons, (coordinator of the Greater Morgantown Area Metropolitan Planning Organization) from the MPO to follow-up on a letter I'd written two years earlier about the new University High School on Baker's Ridge Road. With our current crisis in health care, much of it related to unhealthy lifestyles, I was concerned we would be building a high school that no students could walk or bike to, because of the lack of sidewalks or bike paths.

I have walked for years on Baker's Ridge Road, and without any sidewalk or path, it is becoming more dangerous. On the first day WVU was in session (this fall), my neighbor counted 71 cars in 16 minutes around 5 p.m. But if you think about it, most of our new and recently constructed schools do not have safe ways for students or staff to get there except by buses or cars.

Interestingly, research conducted by WVU scientists has demonstrated that rural communities in our state with more sidewalks have statistically better cardiac health than those with fewer sidewalks. As the dream of a new UHS, Skyview and Mylan Park schools gets closer, and as we plan for our transportation needs for 2030, I hope our community will consider the connection between safe schools, fitness and transportation.

With the huge amount of construction occurring in our county, the most obvious focus is on improving our roads — traffic is simply maddening. However, there are opportunities associated with new road construction, including grants and other funding for walking and biking paths. In its planning process, the federal government requires that sidewalks and bike paths be taken into account when federal transportation funds are used. In addition, recent federal legislation has allotted \$1 million per year in state grant funding for constructing safe routes to schools, i.e. safer cross walks, bike and walking paths, etc.

With lots of heads together, we might come up with funding ideas for connecting the new UHS with the nearby rail-trail or with the Health Sciences Center. Paths and trails are normally cheaper than sidewalks and all must be handicap accessible; however, construction of any routes must include plans for financing future maintenance.

To plan for the future and make the difficult choices, we need everyone's input. Please share your thoughts on how to improve transportation with the MPO by phone, 291-9571, e-mail: parsons@plantogether.org or by mail: MPO, 180 Hart Field Rd., Morgantown, WV 26505.

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