

SRTC's new pedestrian plan has public health emphasis

Plan's recommendation to adopt 'complete street' design policy has interest

By Jeanne Gustafson
OF THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS

The Spokane Regional Transportation Commission board recently approved a six-year regional pedestrian plan that the agency created in coordination with the Spokane Regional Health District and other agencies.

The agency's staff says the plan should help governments and others here plan and secure funding for projects to improve the "walkability" of the Spokane area.

Eve Nelson, a senior transportation planner at SRTC, says the agency previously has produced non-motorized transportation plans that combined both pedestrian and bicycle issues, but this is the first time it has separated the two. She says that working with the health district was a natural fit, because increasing accessibility to pedestrian facilities is a public health issue, too.

"The overall goal is to get more people walking for transportation purposes with the side benefit of improved public health," Nelson says.

"We want to get as many short trips out of the vehicle system as we can," Nelson says. "Twenty five percent nationwide of all trips are a mile or less, which can be accommodated in a walk. The health district goal is to get people out walking for their health. We've seen walking decrease

and obesity increase by 400 percent—maybe if we can reverse this trend it will be good for public health."

She says momentum is building already for one of the plan's recommendations, to incorporate "complete street" public policy, aimed at ensuring that all modes of transportation are evaluated in transportation project planning.

"It requires planners and engineers, when they plan new roadway or retrofit, to look at it from the perspective of all users," Nelson says.

The health district is organizing training for jurisdictions here, to help teach them what such a policy would look like, she says.

The SRTC hopes that the plan will spur a regionwide effort that will encourage creation of additional pedestrian facilities that cross jurisdictional lines. Goals outlined in the plan include increasing pedestrian safety and connectivity, increasing integrated pedestrian paths to provide alternatives to motorized travel, and improving the health of Spokane-area residents by making foot travel more convenient and safe. It also aims to increase the percentage of children who walk to school by 2 percent, up to 28 percent.

Some of the major shortcomings with pedestrian facilities that Spokane-area residents identified in a survey conducted for the plan are a lack of crosswalks; problems with sidewalks, such as gaps in sidewalks and lack of maintenance or, in some areas, no sidewalks; a lack of good lighting after dark; and motorized vehicles making pedestrians feel unsafe.

Jurisdictions have reported that they don't have money to improve those things, and planners and engineers here reported that they need more training in those areas.

"We are trying to target those areas in this plan to improve those things," Nelson says.

A grant from the health district paid for the plan, and SRTC provided staffing, she says.

The major projects recommended in the plan for construction and planning include 33.5 miles of shared-use paths previously identified in the SmartRoutes program, including a University Pedestrian/Bike Bridge; a 5.5-mile Millwood Trail; completion of the 7-mile Fish Lake Trail; extending the Ben Burr Trail east to connect to the Centennial Trail; a 4-mile Liberty Lake Trail System; a 4.4-mile North Greenacres Trail; a 6.3-mile trail that would connect Glenrose

Prairie to the Centennial Trail; and a 4-mile trail that would connect Airway Heights to the Centennial trail. Some, like completion of the Fish Lake Trail, already are in planning, while others are conceptual projects, such as the envisioned trail connections from the Glenrose Prairie area and Airway Heights to the Centennial Trail.

"We have this amazing 37-mile Centennial Trail, but not many convenient urban connections to get to the trail. We want to maximize use of that trail system by making it more convenient and safer to connect," Nelson says. "We are very fortunate to have the trail system that we do. It's in our best interest to make the most of it at this point."

Nelson says the commission hopes to update the plan every four to six years.

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Idaho housing agency awards \$3.5 million for delayed projects

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The Idaho Housing and Finance Association has awarded a total of \$3.5 million in federal economic stimulus money to five low-income housing projects in North Idaho, including three Post Falls projects, through its tax credit assistance program.

The Idaho Housing and Finance Association is a financial institution and administrator of affordable housing resources. The association is a self-support-

and Reinvestment Act, and projects expected to be completed by February of 2012 received priority for the grants. The association says the purpose of the grants is to help restart such projects.

The North Idaho projects that received assistance through the program include the three Post Falls-area developments: the 50-unit Tullamore Commons multi-family apartment project, which was awarded \$1.1 million; the planned Tullamore Senior Apartments, which was awarded \$590,000; and the Silver Creek