

Fond du Lac Reservation Completes Safe Routes to School Plan

There is a new addition to the diversity of Safe Routes to School (SRTS) planning in the State of Minnesota: the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Tribe has become the first Indian tribe in the State to have completed a SRTS plan.

Safe Routes to School programs enable community leaders, schools and parents to improve safety in the vicinity of schools and help raise awareness, increase opportunities and reduce barriers for children to safely walk and bicycle to school. The program's many potential benefits, including reduced traffic congestion and improvements for both personal health and the environment, help make communities more livable for everyone.

In the spring and summer of 2009, the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC) worked with members of the Fond du Lac Reservation to develop a SRTS plan for the Ojibwe School, which serves grades K-12. The Fond du Lac Reservation lies in Northeastern Minnesota adjacent to the city of Cloquet, MN, approximately 20 miles west of Duluth, MN. The Fond du Lac Reservation, established by the LaPointe Treaty of 1854, is one of six Reservations inhabited by members of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. ARDC is a regional comprehensive planning and development agency serving the counties of Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake, and St. Louis in Northeast Minnesota. ARDC's mission is to serve the people of the Arrowhead Region by providing local units of government and citizen groups a means to work cooperatively in identifying needs, solving problems and fostering local leadership.

The project took place between April and August 2009, and included formation of a local SRTS committee, site observations, and parent and student surveys. Working together to discuss existing issues and assets of the Reservation, ARDC helped the committee to identify SRTS goals, action items, and develop a timeline of implementation steps. The process resulted in a final SRTS plan for the Fond du Lac Reservation which the Fond du Lac Business Committee passed a resolution to adopt on August 25th, 2009.

The Fond du Lac Reservation SRTS plan addresses the "5 E's" of Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, Engineering, and Evaluation. According to Jason Hollinday, Director of Planning, the SRTS plan is an exciting new addition to planning for the Reservation, and is helping to make better connections between the Division of Planning, the Ojibwe School, Human Services, and all other divisions.

In January 2010, the Fond du Lac Reservation will undergo a comprehensive strategic planning process, and the plan will seek to incorporate a key engineering action item of the SRTS plan. This focus will be the completion of a paved trail from the local convenience store to the Ojibwe School, covering roughly a two-mile distance. The trail will be named "Gikinoon Inamon", which loosely translates into "Path to School." The completed trail will be a major asset to the community, helping to create better connectivity between residential areas and the school for students, and providing all residents with a safe accommodation for walking and biking along a busy main road. Trail construction will be funded by federal Transportation Enhancement (TE) funds, and work is planned to commence in the fall of 2012 with expected completion in 2013.

Jason Hollinday notes that the SRTS planning process was an important factor in being awarded the TE funding to work on this important trail project.

The Fond du Lac Reservation SRTS plan is also helping to leverage planning efforts for the Fond du Lac Human Services Division's participation in the Minnesota State Health Improvement Program (SHIP) Active Living Intervention. In this statewide health initiative, communities are working to increase opportunities for non-motorized transportation (biking and walking) in effort to fight obesity and improve the health and wellness of residents. Fond du Lac is one of seven Tribes in northeast Minnesota developing and implanting a SHIP program. Joining Fond du Lac are the Mille Lacs, Bois Forte, Grand Portage, Leech Lake, White Earth, and Red Lake Indian tribes.

According to Nate Sandman with the Human Services Division, the SRTS plan fits hand-in-hand with the goals of the SHIP program and provides great opportunities to work collaboratively with all other Divisions. While the Fond du Lac Planning Division is an excellent role to address engineering aspects of the SRTS plan, the Human Services Division is well positioned to assist with the elements of education, encouragement and evaluation.

The Fond du Lac Reservation SRTS plan is ground-breaking planning not only for Tribes in Minnesota, but also for Tribes across the United States. Nationally, only a small percentage of Tribes have completed SRTS plans or have received SRTS funding for projects. Indian tribe reservations commonly face the same bike/pedestrian challenges that non-native communities do, including: lack of (or compromised) infrastructure such as sidewalks or bike trails, decline in student interest in physical activity, and real or perceived concerns for students to safely bike or walk to school. Safe Routes to School planning can help to address existing issues and concerns, and approach problems with solutions and a network of partnership support to make things happen. In the end, planning for Safe Routes to School programs and activities benefits not only students, but the entire community.

Established in May 2006 through funding from the Federal Highway Administration, the National Center for Safe Routes to School assists communities in enabling and encouraging children to safely walk and bicycle to school. For more information on the SRTS program or the National Center, visit www.saferoutesinfo.org or call 1-866-610-SRTS.

For more information on the Fond Du Lac Reservation SRTS plan, contact: Jason Hollinday, Planning Director: (218) 878-2625 or JasonHollinday@FDLREZ.com.

Bonnie Hundrieser, Senior Planner with the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission provided this article and may be reached with questions or comments at: (218) 529-7527 or bhundrieser@ardc.org.