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Networks of Opportunity: Public Engagement Survey Results

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Networks of Opportunity:

Public Engagement Survey Results



Sammi Gay and Derek Krevat Urbanism, Spring 2017 MRP UMass Amherst

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Introduction

The Project for Public Spaces notes, "People who use a public space are the ones who know, from experience, which areas are dangerous and why, which spaces are comfortable, where traffic moves too quickly and how certain aspects of a space could be improved" (2011, p. 13). Therefore, public engagement was a core part of our project.

As previously stated, one major objective of this project is to propose safer paths to school for students. This objective stems from the fact that no bus services are provided to children who live within 1 mile of an elementary school, 1.5 miles of a middle school, and 2 miles of a high school. Since Pacer Planning could not gain students' input for ethical reasons, target stakeholders that can act as proxies for the student population are the City's Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs), public safety officials, and school administration officials. In a similar vein, the target population includes students' parents. Gaining these individuals' input on where problem areas exist would provide invaluable insight when formulating our recommendations.

Methodology

To reach both our target stakeholders (namely school administration officials) and our target population (namely parents of school-aged children), Pacer Planning determined that a two-pronged public engagement strategy would be most effective. To reach our target stakeholders, we conducted in-person and phone interviews with school administration officials at several of Chicopee's public schools. The survey and interview period ran from October 11, 2016 to November 18, 2016.

In-Person and Phone Interview

Throughout the six-week public engagement period, Pacer Planning held 7 total interviews with school administration officials in Chicopee. These interviews were with 4 principals, 2 vice principals, and a representative from the City Engineer's office. In each of these interviews, Pacer Planning asked interviewees the following 5 prompts:

- 1. How safe is it for children to walk to school in the City?
- 2. What types of infrastructural or design changes would make streets leading to schools safer?

- 3. Which specific streets could be better designed for student walkers?
- 4. How would enhanced walkability affect students' ability to report to school regularly and in a timely manner?
- 5. Which streets are made less accessible by snow build-up, storage, and icy conditions for students walking to school during the months?

After each interview, Pacer Planning transcribed interviewees' responses to these prompts.

Electronic Survey

Additionally, Pacer Planning distributed an electronic survey using the Google Forms platform to our target population of parents of school children in Chicopee entitled the "Chicopee Student Walker Safety Survey." We received 106 responses to our survey over the study period. In addition to containing the same five open-ended questions we used for the interviews (listed above), the electronic survey asked respondents a series of background questions related to which of the City's schools they were familiar with, as well as a question asking them to select the factors that were involved in their decision to allow or not allow their child to walk to school. The full survey questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

The electronic format of the survey allowed for greater access to the public. Additionally, the survey contained an option for participants to provide their email for future contact. To ensure that survey respondents are kept informed of this report's overall findings, Pacer Planning committed to sending personal invitations to all interviewees and survey respondents to our final presentation, held on December 15, 2016 at Chicopee High School, via email.

Public Engagement Findings Interview Findings

Pacer Planning received a great deal of feedback during the interview process. Overall, although many school administration officials stated they had experienced no major incidents related to pedestrian safety, there was a significant amount of enthusiasm for the conversation surrounding safer paths to schools for student walkers and bicyclists. We believe that this enthusiasm stems from the finding that most

students in Chicopee do not currently walk to school, but would if there were safer walking conditions.

Pacer Planning notes specific findings related to each school in Chapters 7, 8, and 9, which outline each of the sectors of Chicopee. Each of these chapters includes a public engagement subheading. In these sections, we highlight quotes from interviewees related to areas of concern and suggestions for improving the walkability of these areas.

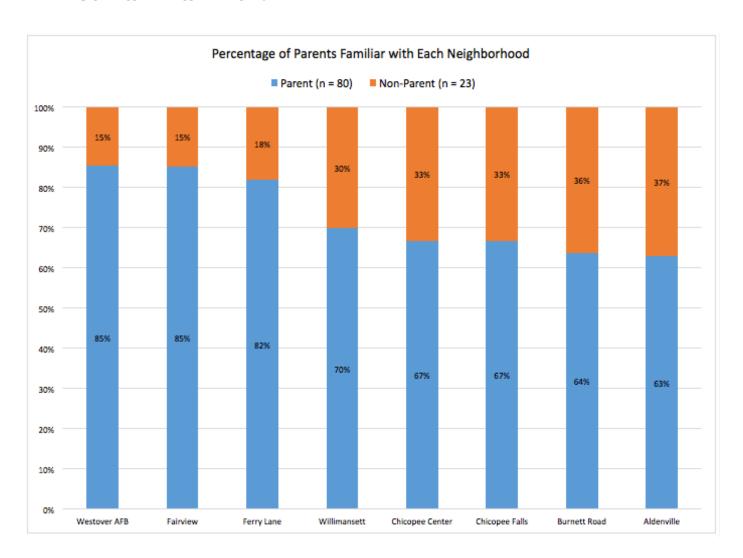
Electronic Survey Findings

Major Electronic Survey findings will be listed at the end of this report.

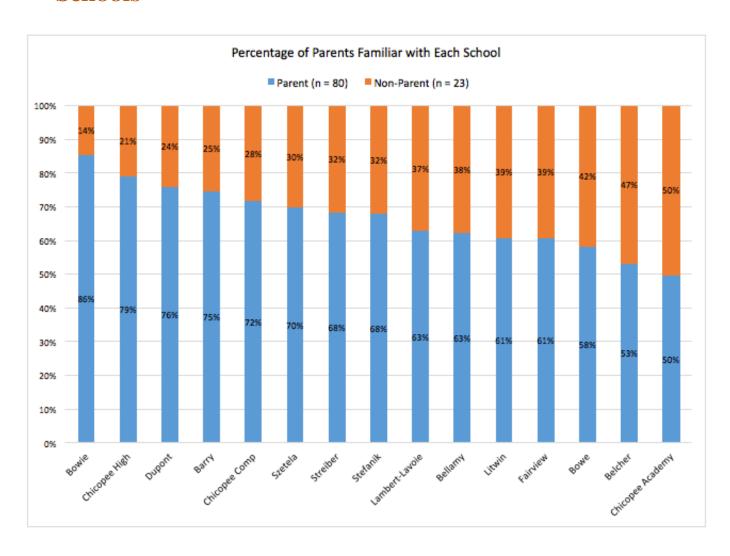
About This Report

This report acts as the final culmination of data assessment from the Student Walker Survey, distributed by Pacer Planning. Data from the multiple choice survey questions are represented in the bar graphs below, seen in Questions 1, 2, and 5. These questions were designed to allow Pacer Planning assess demographic and geographic variance between respondents. The other data is derived from the surveys open-ended responses, visually represented in word clouds (from the Jason Davies online generator) which display words with the highest frequency. The excerpts below the word clouds were selected at random to offer a greater sense of clarity and context.

Q1: Which Neighborhoods in the City of Chicopee Are You Familiar with?



Q2: Please Provide Your Association with the Chicopee Schools



Q3: How Safe do you feel it is for Children to Ride their Bike to School in the City of Chicopee?



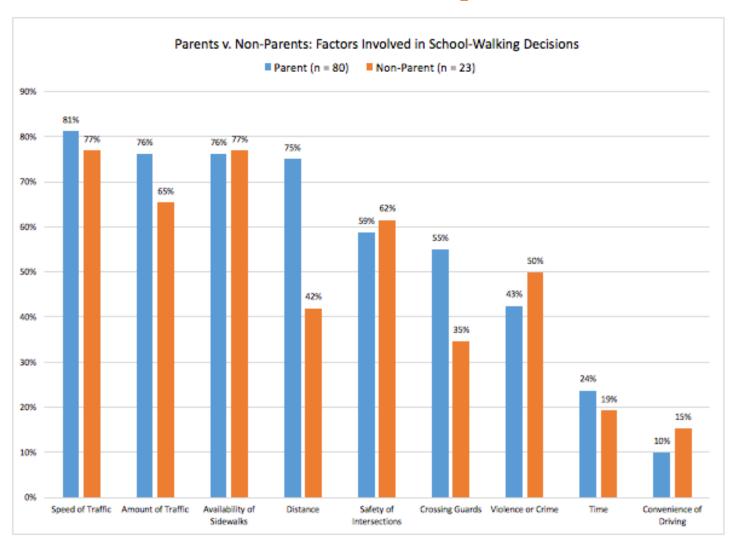
- 1. "My daughter is considered a walker to Chicopee Comp. We live 1.85 miles from the school. I live off Pendleton about on the Bellamy school side. Her walking route has her going through the rotary area on Memorial drive through the lots of town fair tire, u haul, lighthouse liquors and bridge cafe. She has to climb over a barrier in one of the lots. In the winter, snow-mountains make going through these lots impossible. I drive her to school all year. I feel it is not safe for her to walk that route. The bus stop for the kids who live two miles from CCHS is literally at the end of my street."
- 2. "Not safe there are way too many streets without sidewalks which means these kids of all ages have to walk in the road... with winter upon us it makes the situation even more dangerous"
- 3. "Chicopee drivers do not seem to stop for crosswalks for people or bicycles. Until this changes and becomes more pedestrian friendly, I do not feel that it is always safe."
- 4. "For the most part safe, but I'm talking about high school age."
- 5. "I feel the city as a whole is safe. The issue is traffic.

Q4: Which Streets Could Be Better Designed for Students Walking or Bicycling to School?



- 1. "Montgomery only has sidewalks on one side of the road but plenty of kids live on the opposite side and are expected to cross Montgomery to get to the sidewalks to walk to Comp or Bellamy. Also the sidewalk on Yelle street towards Bellamy is not legally wide enough for one child never mind a wheelchair"
- 2. "More speed patrol/enforcement needed in front st when schools are letting out"
- 3. "Many of the side streets near Bowe, St. Stanislaus, CHS and Dupont have no sidewalks, students often walk down Moore Street, Haven and the side streets on the opposite side of Fairview Avenue. There should be at least 1 sidewalk for all of the students coming from this side of town to get to the middle and High schools safely."
- 4. "Grattan Street and any major intersection where there is no crossing guard present. Also if the child shows up early or late, there might not be a crossing guard there so general safety is a concern. The new lines and lane markers are not always given attention by drivers since they were altered so it poses a risk until drivers are used to the new lane markers."
- 5. "All of them."

Q5: What of the Following Issues do You Believe Affects Parents Decisions to Allow or Not Allow Their Children to Walk to and from Schools in Chicopee?

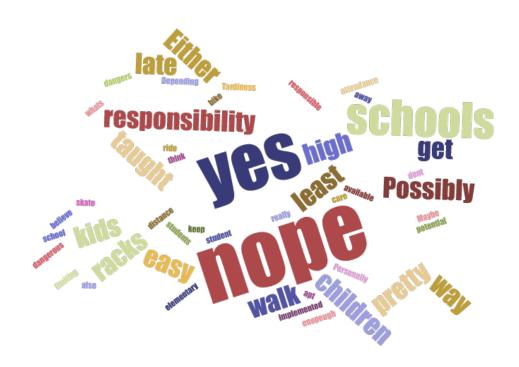


Q6: Do you Have Any Thoughts or Suggestions about What Would Make Streets that Lead to Schools Safer?



- 1. "Improved signage, especially where lane markers have changed."
- 2. "Better lighting, improved crosswalks, more police presence at busier intersections"
- 3. "More buses. If 1 child gets a bus all children should get a bus...."
- 4. "Bicycle lanes in the area of schools would nice. Maybe within a mile of schools. Lots of visual reminders to drivers that they are traveling in a school zone."
- 5. "Enforcement of parking signs for No Parking on main roads especially in school zones. Parents and people need to be ticketed or towed. Signage indicating school zones that are "main walkways" that students proceed home."

Q7: How Might Enhanced Walkability Affect Student's Ability to Report to School Regularly and in a Timely Manner?



- 1. "I think the distance students walk has a negative influence on attendance and tardiness, especially in the winter months."
- 2. "Maybe but I don't think much especially if weather is not good"
- 3. "Improved transportation would help ... if a kid has a disability or the parent has a disability and can't get there child to school to know there was a safe and reliable source would ease parents minds"
- 4. "Yes, I also believe if there were more bike racks available or skate racks students would be more apt to ride than walk."
- 5. "Personally, I do not think any elementary student should have to walk to school. Some kids are responsible enough to keep away from potential dangers but not all so limiting to distance is dangerous."

Q8: Which Streets Are Made Less Accessible By Snow Build-Up for Students Walking to School During the Winter?



- 1. "Homeowners do a good job of shoveling their sidewalks, the city and stateare rarely cleared. Drivers are not cautious enough. Students have to walk in the street. Side roads are not clear for adults to get to work, let alone kids who have to walk."
- 2. "No one wants to be out in that, and given how on st parking narrows the road and impedes visibility and people failing to clear sidewalks no parent is going to trust their child is safe from a skidding car in poor weather"
- 3. "Homeowners/business owners don't shovel before school or before school gets out and kids have to walk on the roads to get by. If it's a major path to the school then they need to be enforced to clear the sidewalks for kids."
- 4. "Sidewalks that are not shoveled, side streets that get plowed last and parents that have NO transportation are less likely to walk their children to school with inclement weather. Also many cars are parked illegally on streets, plows can not do as efficient of a job and roads become narrow etc. These cars should be towed and ticketed."
- 5. "Snow obstructing views at street corners where bus stops and children have to stand in the morning"

Major Findings

The execution of this survey offered a glimpse into public sentiment of Chicopee parents regarding the safety of their children, on their school commutes. The additional insight from non-parents further cemented the need for non-vehicular travel accommodations throughout the city. The strongly opinionated survey results, not only justified the City-Wide Bike and Pedestrian Path proposed by Pacer Planning, but it also allowed for a greater understanding of how Chicopee residents (predominately parents) vision the future of their city.

Results from the Survey's multiple choice questions, represented in the bar graphs, were purely demographic - thus allowing for Pacer Planning to assess who the respondents were and where they were coming from within the city. Question 1 provided a geographic framework from respondents. Though their was no major variation between each respective group, we see that most parents are coming from the Westover AFB and Fairview neighborhoods, while non-parents are mostly representing the Aldenville and Burnett Road neighborhoods. Such geographic variations suggests there are commutes for both parties to get to and from schools, as most of Chicopee's schools are populated in the Fairview and Aldenville neighborhoods, as well as the South Sector of Chicopee. For Question 2, we see that most of the parents are familiar with the Bowie and Chicopee High schools while non-parents are more familiar with the Belcher and Chicopee Academy schools, with much variation in between. As there are a lot of schools within the city's jurisdiction, the variation is not surprising as many of the respondents mentioned they have children within the schools, work at the schools, and even went to many of the schools as well. Lastly, Question 5 offers more detailed insight into the pressing concerns that support or hinder student abilities to walk or bike to school. These results show us that parents and non-parents alike host genuine concern for the well-being of students, listing Speed of Traffic, Amount of Traffic, and Sidewalk Availability as their major concerns. More variety is displayed in questions regarding distance and crossing guards, which makes sense because non-parents might not be concerned about such matters since they have no school-aged children. From this question we also see that Time or Convenience are not pressing factors for either group,

reflecting the city's comfortable attitude and reliance towards the automobile.

While the multiple choice questions allowed us to assess the demographic variables of the Survey respondents, the open ended questions, represented in word cloud formation, allowed for more feeling-based and thought provoking responses. The responses offered in Question 3 offered minimal variation in responses, as most answers shared a very similar sentiment: the city is not safe for students to walk or bike to school. While some response were brief in nature, others offered vivid testimonies and suggestions for improvement. A lot of specific street names and schools were mentioned in the responses, offering potential areas of prioritization for the City. The subsequent question (4) contributed further insight on streets that could use prioritized attention. While streets all throughout Chicopee were mentioned with valid supporting arguments, the most frequently represented streets were: Burnett Road, Granby Road, Memorial Drive, Grattan Street, and Pendleton Ave.

To support the other questions, Question 6 gave respondents the opportunity to explicit list suggestions to enhance the school commuter experience. Many of the responses suggested physical redesign, some as major as inserting new sidewalks and crosswalks while others considered smaller features like increased signage and parking restrictions. Many suggested that the increased presence of crossing guards and better lighting would create safer environments for children and parents alike. Question 7 has the lowest response rate of all of the questions, which may be due to the usage of the term walkability - as some respondents stated they simply did not know what the term meant. Such confusion allowed for great variation between the few responses; some respondents placed the responsibility of getting students on time on the caretakers, while others expressed that due to the given conditions of the city infrastructure there is no way they would let their students walk as it is too far and unsafe. Aligned with the nature of the question, the most frequent words were variations of no (represented on the word cloud as "nope") immediately followed by "yes." A response with greater clarity might have been offered with different terminology used in the question. The final question was designed to assess sentiments related to non-automobile travel in the wintertime. While a great number of respondents were in opposition, most suggesting they would much rather drive their kid to school, they too offered lively and clear

suggestions as to how to remedy the inaccessibility for travel in the winter. Many requested greater enforcement for snow removal by the City, thus allowing for more visibility and a decrease in icy road conditions.

Overall, the notable response rate of the Student Walker Survey demonstrated the willingness of Chicopee's public to participate in the visioning of a a greater city. The results were critical and hopeful, displaying a need for change for the betterment of both Chicopee's current population and the generations to come.