

Walkability Audit and Workshop Outcomes Dow's Prairie Elementary School September 20, 2012

Humboldt County Association of Governments, Humboldt County DHHS Public Health Branch
& Natural Resources Services Division of Redwood Community Action Agency



Overview: A Walkability Audit and Workshop was held in McKinleyville on September 20th, 2012 to observe the primary grades dismissal time at Dow's Prairie Elementary School and identify concerns and solutions to safety issues. Participants included parents, neighbors, the school principal, California Highway Patrol, Arcata Fire District Chief, Humboldt County Public Works Department, HCOE's California Joint Powers Authority Risk Manager, Caltrans staff, NRS/RCAA staff, and County Public Health. The Audit was supported through a Community Transformation Grant as well as a County-Wide Safe Routes to Schools (SR2S) Task Force effort funded through the Humboldt County Association of Governments (HCAOG). HCAOG is working to increase capacity at local schools to develop and implement safety programs and encourage children to safely walk and bike to and from school.

Attendees:

The Audit helped forge strong relationships between city staff, school district personnel and community members. The Audit was attended by:

- Kevin Sheffler, Dow's Prairie principal
- Desmond Cowan, Arcata Fire District Chief
- Chase Adams, CHP Public Information Officer
- Chris Whitworth, Humboldt County Deputy Director of Engineering
- Kimberly Comet, Humboldt County Office of Education Risk Manager
- Alyson Hunter, Caltrans Associate Transportation Planner
- Melanie Williams, Bicycling Advocate
- Joan Levy and Michelle Postman, Humboldt County DHHS Public Health Staff
- Pedestrian and bicycling advocates, teachers, parents, and neighbors were also in attendance.

Visioning: At the beginning of the workshop, participants were asked to share their vision for the workshop and the outcomes they would like to see:

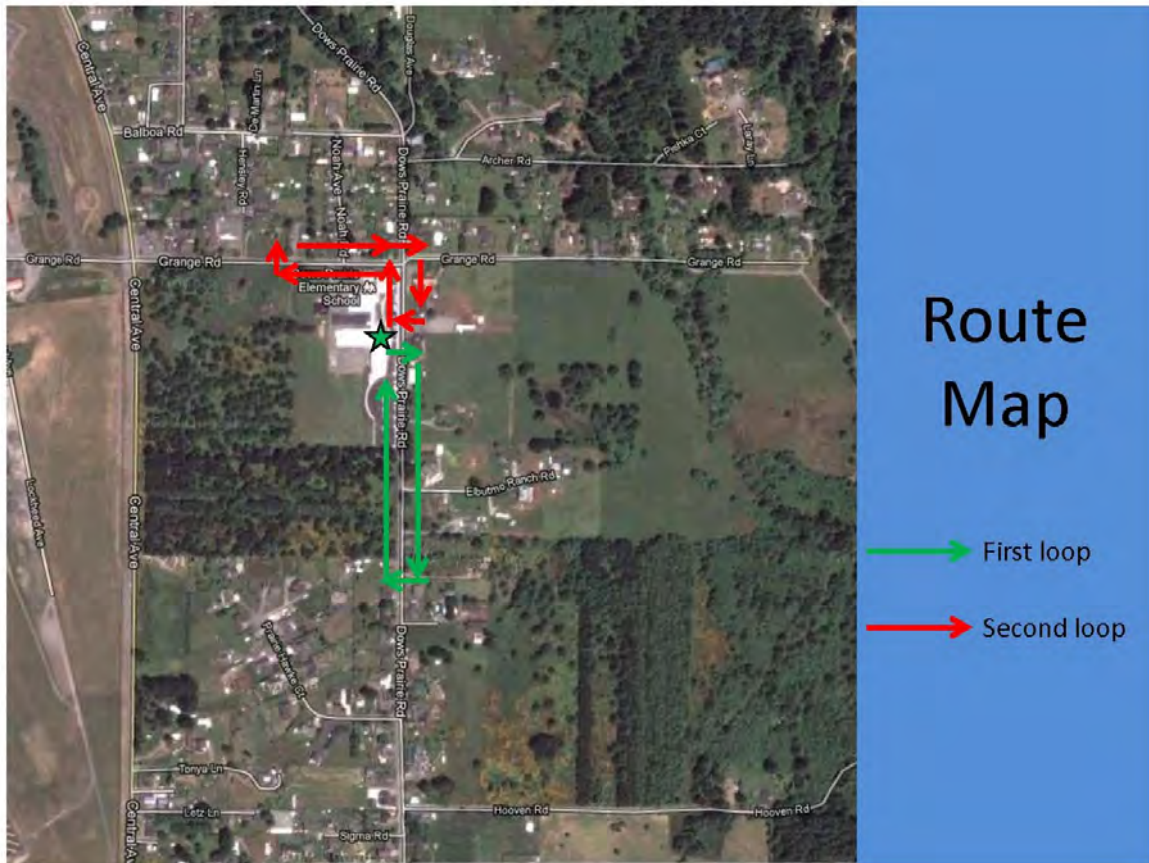
- Collaboration with parents
- Learn to see with 'new eyes' (of children)
- Community involvement to be competitive for grants
- Kids walking/biking daily to Dow's Prairie
- Safety liability issues addressed
- Safe bicycling behavior education
- Reach Spanish speaking families
- Safety getting to school
- Understand enforcement and education opportunities
- Expand understanding of the benefits of walk audits

Background: Dow's Prairie is located at the north end of McKinleyville in unincorporated Humboldt County. It is a K-5 school in a rural area where the majority of students ride the bus or travel by private family vehicle to school. There is limited pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure near the school; however, recent school improvements by the school district included the installation of a sidewalk in front of the school on the west side of Dow's Prairie Road and improvements to the loading zone and parking area. Initial concerns/comments expressed by participants prior to the field exercise include:

- Lack of a sidewalk north to connect with neighborhoods north of school
- Need for a separated pathway adjacent to Central Ave
- Vegetation encroaching on signage on Central Avenue
- 'End of School Zone' signs are helpful in making motorists aware of the School Speed Zone
- Cars line up and block crosswalks at Dow's Prairie and Grange Roads in the morning
- Cars lined up to drop off kids also block the crosswalks in the school parking lot loading zone
- A courtesy campaign and safety education for parents is needed
- Educating kids on safety at loading zone is necessary
- Parking lot outside of office needs clearer signage/no parking red curb
- Bus stops should be located where kids don't need to cross streets
- Parents are often smoking at bus stops when waiting for children
- Create signage (and incorporate into wellness policy) No Smoking at bus stops
- Coordinate and develop relationships with neighbors as allies
- Establish alternate trails/entrances to Dow's Prairie
- Grange Road needs pedestrian facilities
- Central Ave is a 45 mph zone but cars travel at 55 mph
- Central Ave needs to be narrowed to slow cars and install sidewalks/bike paths

Observation of School Environment: Participants gathered in the front of Dow's Prairie Elementary to observe the behavior of students, parents and motorists during dismissal of the primary grades at 2:15 p.m. A new protocol has been established where parents waiting for students are instructed to park and gather outside the school fence and students are then released to parents/caregivers. Several parents were observed parking in the 'Loading Zone' where motorists are instructed not to leave their cars unattended. There were multiple discussions about parking lot traffic flow improvements that could be made as well as providing clearer signage and parking restrictions in the parking lot.

Many students at Dow's Prairie line up to ride the bus home or to an afterschool program at Morris Elementary. The group observed the bus loading area before walking further down Dow's Prairie Road. The sidewalk ends at the end of the school parking lot, so participants crossed the street at the marked (but barely visible) crosswalk and walked south down Dow's Prairie Road facing traffic. After observing safety concerns on Dow's Prairie, the group crossed the street and walked back along the sidewalk until it ended and from there walked in the road to the next sidewalk segment. From there the group walked to the intersection of Dow's Prairie and Grange Road to observe the existing infrastructure and discuss potential improvements to help pedestrians and bicyclists as well as ways to improve drainage and visibility. The group then reconvened in a classroom to discuss the observed safety concerns and begin brainstorming ways to address the concerns.



FINDINGS:



Dismissal for the primary grades is at 2:15pm.
Cars begin lining up in the 'Loading Zone' shortly after 2 pm.



Many motorists disregard the 'No Parking/Loading Zone'. One parent, when asked why she parked there, remarked because she is lazy.



Families are asked to wait for students outside the gate.



This parent was observed doing the right thing -- parking then walking to greet her children.



Many students line up to ride the bus home or to an afterschool program at Morris Elementary School.



Better pavement markings to direct pedestrians as well as motorists would improve clarity and safety in the parking lot.



The sidewalk in front of the school ends at the south end of the parking lot. Without sidewalks on the east side of the street, this crosswalk leads to a ditch.



The overgrowth of brush contributes to poor sight visibility and forces pedestrians to walk further out into the street.



Pavement markings indicate it is a school zone, but the lack of sidewalks on Dow's Prairie Road is hazardous for pedestrians.



Many parents park on the east side of Dow's Prairie Road across from the school and dart across the road to get to their vehicles.



In addition to a lack of sidewalks on the east side of Dow's Prairie Road, there are no gutters and poor drainage making this street difficult to navigate on foot.



This power pole (left) blocks half the sidewalk making it difficult for wheelchairs and strollers to navigate. This sidewalk extension (right) was part of a school improvement project and was an innovative solution that allowed more space to get around the pole.



Grange Road, which is adjacent to Dow's Prairie School, also lacks sidewalks.



For students who live within walking distance, the lack of sidewalks is a huge barrier in getting to school safely.



The two main crosswalks on Dow's Prairie Road and Grange Road are not very visible. Additionally, there is no stop sign on Dow's Prairie Road at this intersection.



Central Avenue is a 45 mph zone but most vehicles travel faster. Narrowing the lane width and making shoulder improvements such as adding bicycle lanes and/or a separated walking path would increase safety on this route.



Identifying Concerns and Solutions: After the Observation and Walk, participants discussed different SR2S engineering, education, and encouragement strategies that could potentially help solve some of the safety concerns encountered on the walk. Participants identified that a top priority should be communicating safety concerns and arrival and dismissal protocol with parents. The group then brainstormed ideas for a safety and courtesy campaign aimed at parents.

Parent Education Needs:

- Establishing and communicating parking and drop-off protocol
- Exhibiting good behavior as positive role models
- Education on the health benefits of walking
- Learning to keep eyes and ears on places kids' walk
- Assistance with time management recommendations
- Providing second hand smoke education

Parent Education Actions:

- Add safety and pick up/drop off information to parent handbook
- Create a school campaign; incorporate into a contest
- Work with PTO/parent club or Site Council/Wellness Committee on the campaign
- Create a kids slogan campaign
- Establish goals for International Walk to School Day in October 2013
- Focus on education and improvements in drop-off/pick-up area
- Create parent-led carpooling network (parents can lead – school can't)
- Encourage more kids to ride on the buses
- Establish a safety patrol established by parent club with clear, concise duties
- Create incentive program for drivers
 - Give drivers prizes, or raffle tickets towards a prize for good behavior
 - Ask local merchants to donate prizes, i.e. coffee cards
 - For good drivers, award points to their child's class and turn into school-wide classroom competition
 - Distribute stickers such as "My parent is a safe driver", "I drive safely for my child", "I brake for Cougars".

Participants then broke into small groups to identify and discuss their concerns. Using street view maps, participants came up with engineering, education, enforcement, and encouragement strategies which they noted on the maps. The following are the identified concerns of participants and recommendations:

PRIMARY CONCERNS:

- Parking lot directly outside office is congested with unattended vehicles
- West side of Dow's Prairie Road has a large sidewalk gap just south of the school
- Drainage issues on east side of Dow's Prairie Road creates puddles and mud
- Crosswalks at Dow's Prairie Road and Grange Road need repainting for better visibility
- Intersection of Dow's Prairie Road and Grange Road lacks a stop sign or other traffic control device on Dow's Prairie Road
- Drop-off protocol in parking lot needs to be better communicated to drivers
- Parent drivers are not courteous
- "Loading Zone/No Parking Area" may not be visible or clear enough
- Traffic flow in parking lot needs improvement

Recommendations and Action Items: Groups reported out on what concerns they identified and which engineering, education and encouragement strategies they propose to solve the issues. The workshop participants then worked together to group recommendations into short term, mid term and long-term categories. Participants have committed to taking on actions to move forward short-term recommendations to improving safety at the two schools.

Next Steps - Short term plans

	Action	Who?	Timeline
1.	Encourage completion of SR2S parent surveys	Jenny, Emily, Kevin	ASAP
2.	Compose a letter to parents re: courtesy and protocol	Kevin/Parent Club	ASAP
3.	Paint red curb zone in front of office	Kevin	Will check with maintenance
4.	Compose a letter to parents about red curb changes	Kimberly	If change is made
5.	Research traffic study for a potential stop sign and/or other relevant traffic control devices at Dow's Prairie & Grange roads	County Public Works	ASAP
6.	Determine if County can mow or grade along sidewalk gap on Dow's Prairie Road south of the school	County Public Works	ASAP

Next Steps – Mid term plans

	Action	Who?
1.	Pitch to Parent Club idea of launching safety campaign	Parents + Kevin
2.	Re-paint both crosswalks at Dow's Prairie and Grange 'ladder-style'	County Public Works
3.	Install more clear directional signage in parking lot	School District
4.	Re-establish parking lot to one-way traffic	School District
5.	Create more visible paint markings in Loading Zone or install barrier with signs to indicate no parking/loading only	School District
6.	Install temporary 'pylons' or tall, floppy cones in drop off/loading zone	School District
7.	Paint safety graphic on cement near office	School District
8.	Shift center line on Dow's Prairie Road to allow more room on east side	County Public Works
9.	Research establishing afterschool program on Dow's Prairie campus for primary grades	Kevin
10.	Incentivize good parent behavior by giving prizes or points to child of driver	Parent Club

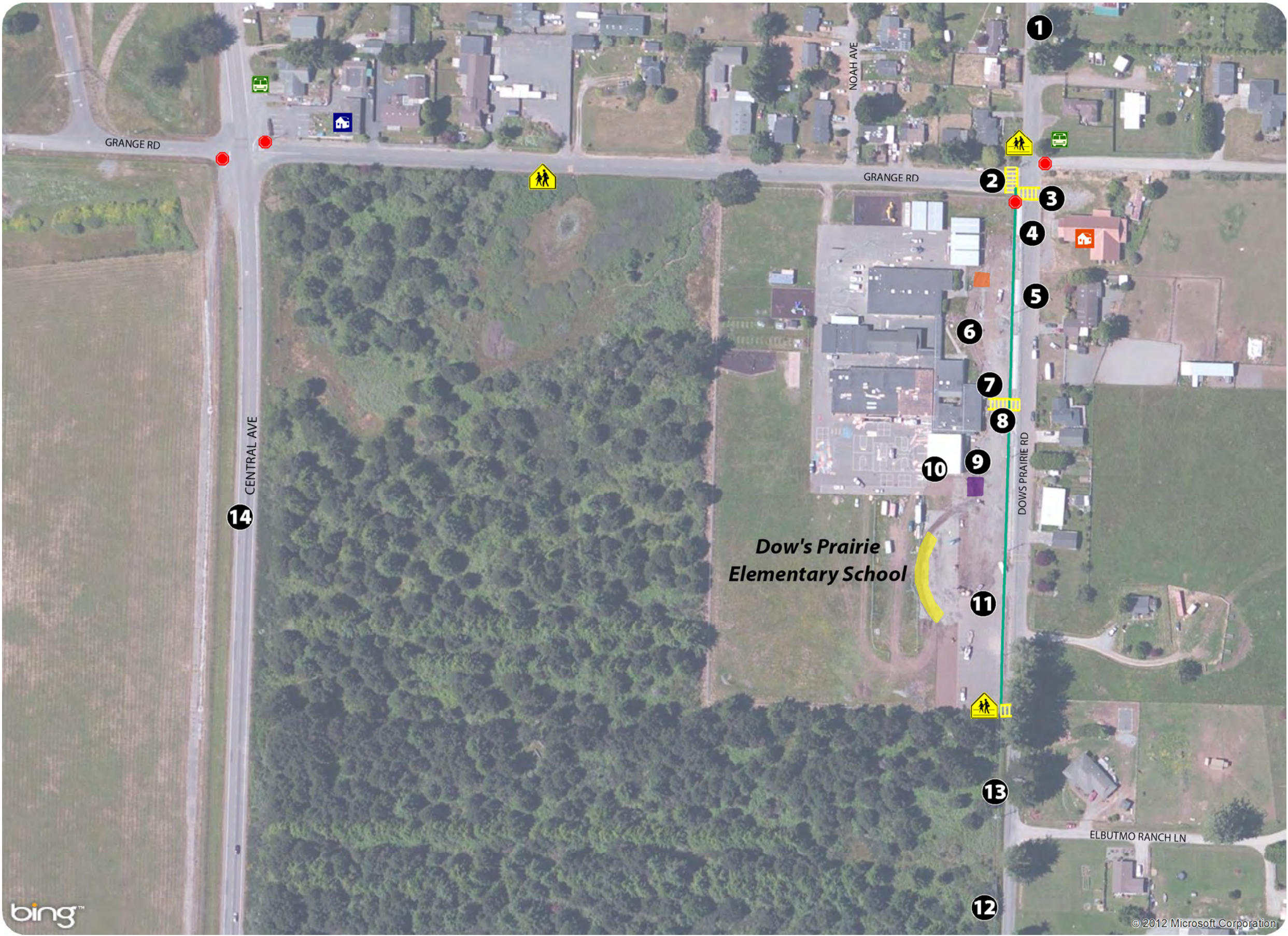
Next Steps – Long term plans

	Action	Who?
1.	Connect sidewalk gap southward on west side of Dow's Prairie Road	County Public Works
2.	Stop sign or other traffic control at Dow's Prairie and Grange intersection	County Public Works
3.	Drainage improvements on east side of Dow's Prairie	County Public Works
4.	Install sidewalks on Grange Road to connect with Children's Center and HTA bus stop	County Public Works
5.	Add center path crosswalk in parking lot that extends in between parked cars facing each other	School District
6.	Central Ave shoulder improvements	County Public Works
7.	Encourage more bussing	Parent Club + Kevin
8.	Allow rear access to school led by adult volunteer Walking School Bus leaders	School District + Parent Club
9.	Install covered bike parking	School District
10.	Coordinate with Children's Center for rideshare program	Parents

Recommended Improvements

Dow's Prairie Elementary School

- 1 Create improved, wider shoulder for safer walking and bicycling
- 2 Paint both crosswalks at Dow's Prairie and Grange 'ladder-style'
- 3 Conduct new traffic study to research the potential for a stop sign and/or other relevant traffic control devices
- 4 Install curb and gutter to improve drainage. Install sidewalk
- 5 Have more CHP presence at school especially during arrival and dismissal
- 6 Install temporary pylons or tall, floppy cones in drop off/loading zone
- 7 Paint red curbs on both sides to mark a No Parking Zone near the crosswalk outside the school office
- 8 Re-establish parking lot to one-way traffic
- 9 Create more visible paint markings or install barrier with signs to indicate no parking zone
- 10 Create covered bike racks
- 11 Install crosswalk from dismissal gate to south parking lot. Install crosswalk/walking path pavement markings between lines of parked cars to create a walking path so kids do not have to walk behind parked cars.
- 12 Connect sidewalk gap on west side of Dow's Prairie Road
- 13 Mow vegetation and/or grade to make this stretch flat and clear
- 14 Improve Central Ave for bicyclists and pedestrians by installing bike lanes, paths, and/or sidewalks



Stop Sign



School Zone Sign



School Crossing Sign



Bus Stop



Dow's Prairie Children's Center



Dow's Prairie Grange



Crosswalk



Sidewalk



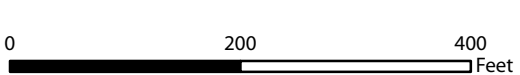
Bus Loading Zone



Primary Grade Drop-Off Area



Upper Grade Drop-Off Area



SCHOOL SITE WALKABILITY AUDIT FORM

Date: _____ Day: _____ Time: _____ Weather Conditions: _____

1. Student Drop-Off Area

YES

NO

NA

- ☐

- 9

- 5

- ☐

- ☐

- 1

- 1

- ☐

- i. Please describe additional problems within the student drop-off area in the space provided below. What improvements would alleviate the problems?



2. Bus Loading Zones

YES

NO

NA

a. Are bus driveways physically separated from pedestrian and bicycling routes by raised curbs or bollards?

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b. Are bus driveways physically separated from parent pick-up/drop-off areas?

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c. If the buses are “double-stacked” for drop-off/loading areas, are measures taken for safety of students needing to cross in front or behind the bus?

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d. Is traffic in the bus loading zone one-way?

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e. Does the bus zone meet the minimum width of 24' for drop-off/pull-out lanes?

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f. Is there a continuous curb and sidewalk adjacent to the drop-off/loading area leading into the school site?

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g. Is the bus loading/unloading zone lighted?

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h. Please describe additional problem areas regarding the bus loading zone in the space provided below.

3. Sidewalks and Bicycle Routes

YES

NO

NA

a. Are current pedestrian and bicycle routes separated from motor vehicles by the use of sidewalks or separated pathways?

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b. Are the bicycle routes designated by signage?

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c. Are marked bicycle lanes present?

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d. Are sidewalks and bicycle paths regularly maintained? (free of debris, cracks and holes)?

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e. Are there accessible ramps for wheel chair access?

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f. Are the sidewalks continuous and without gaps?

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g. Do the ramps have tactile warning strips or textured concrete?

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h. Are the sidewalks lighted?

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i. Are the sidewalks used regularly?

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j. Please describe additional problem areas regarding the school's sidewalk system and existing bicycle routes in the space provided below.



Let's WALK it out!



Neighborhoods
need to be safe to
encourage active
commuting to school ~
help us create strategies!

Thursday September 20, 2012

1pm - 5pm



Dow's Prairie Elementary School
3940 Dow's Prairie Road, McKinleyville

Please join parents, teachers, neighbors, and county officials for a school site walkability assessment and workshop to identify issues students face walking to Dow's Prairie Elementary School. We will discuss the important connection between the built environment, student health, and walking.

Please wear comfortable shoes. The event will take place **rain or shine.**



This project is made possible through the Humboldt County Association of Governments and Humboldt County Public Health Branch with coordination from the Redwood Community Action Agency.

For more information contact:
Jenny Weiss of RCAA at 269-2062 or weiss@nrsrcaa.org.

