



News

WalkBoston turns 20

by Mike Roberts
MySouthEnd.com Contributor
Tuesday Mar 16, 2010



Former WalkBoston president Ann Hershfang presents fellow South Ender Ken Kruckemeyer with an award for his advocacy. (Source:WalkBoston)

EMAIL PRINT SHARE BUZZ UP!

South Enders have left their footprint across the state

You just zipped up your daughter's coat, handed her a bagged lunch, and put the leash on the dog. It's time to walk to the bus stop. You meet your waiting friend outside with his daughter and the girls ride their tricycles together. Along the way, you grab a cup of coffee and the newspaper from the corner store. The headline reads that construction starts tomorrow and Mass. Ave.'s car lanes are going to be

widened and the sidewalks narrowed. You realize the streets will be significantly less usable-walking the dog with your friend and letting your daughters play will be out of the question. What can you do to stop this?

Contact the first-ever pedestrian advocacy group in the United States, WalkBoston (WB). Appropriately headquartered in America's "walking city," the nonprofit, which was formed by South Enders, celebrated its 20th anniversary of making Massachusetts communities more walkable places on March 11. With 2,500 members, spanning across 58 cities and towns, the group focuses on social, economic, environmental, and health issues in communities through the improvement of walking conditions.

"We came up with the idea to make an organization that would fight for better pedestrian conditions. We knew we could do it because we all had the technical transportation skills," explained South Ender Ann Hershfang, a co-founder of WB with twenty-five years of policy-making experience in transportation.

The organization educates people and reminds them that walking is a major mode of transportation. It argues that creating more walkable areas not only promotes healthier people by benefiting the body, but also helps build stronger communities by increasing pedestrian activity in residential areas. According to WB, walkers are more likely to utilize local businesses and become more neighborly, which consequently decreases crime rates.

"People forget about pedestrians. It used to be for a new project or for a road reconstruction project, you gave the responsibility to the landscape architects-they like trees, not pedestrians. So you would end up with a lot of nice trees on the sidewalks and not much space to walk," said Hershfang.

In 2006, as a proactive approach to ameliorating walking conditions, WB, along with other state advocacy groups, successfully worked to rewrite the state's MassHighway Project & Development Design Guide. The manual now includes the most progressive walking and bicycling requirements in the United States, according to Hershfang. Because of its successful efforts over the past years, the organization is funded by grants from both the state and various foundations. With funding from The Boston Foundation, WB is currently working on increasing the pedestrian walking times on street lights to make the streets more walkable.

"Some lights give only seven seconds of street crossing time and we're

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- 3.18-4 Metropolis y Orillas 21 Exhibition
- 3.18 Jazz Department Concert - 100 Years of Jazz
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- 3.20 Ellis Clean Up
- 3.20 'Paris' at Aunt Sadie's
- 3.21 Boston Prime Timers Monthly Meeting
- 3.23 SPRING OPEN HOUSE AT REVOLUTION FITNESS
- 3.24 Preschool Storytime

Quick Poll

Has your home been affected by the torrential downpour that's hitting the city?

- Nope, still dry
- We're soaked
- Not sure, I'm hoping there's not a surprise in the basement when I get home

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working to increase that," said Hershfang. "The idea is that with less wait time and more crossing time, pedestrians won't jaywalk, increasing safety, and it will also make the walk more enjoyable because you won't have to wait."

The organization also leads interesting walks and tours year-round, produces educational materials about walking in specific areas and how to advocate for better conditions, and offers a list of roughly 20 maps for local communities. The maps are created to encourage walking by showing people how close many activities actually are, or to appeal to a specific target audience, for example, patients and families at MGH.

The nonprofit also acts as an expansive resource of information for members or people looking to impact a certain issue. South Ender Nina Garfinkle, a current WB board member and head of the communications committee, learned about the resourcefulness of WB firsthand years ago as she noticed that the construction being done on a median strip near Back Bay Station left very limited walking space—not enough room for more than one person or for someone using a wheelchair. She contacted WB and the organization provided her with an address to which she wrote a letter.

"I walked by two days later and they were making it wider. The point is, you can make a difference on little things like that, I've seen it, you just need to speak up," said Garfinkle.

Similarly, Medford native Maggie Carvan, a longtime advocate and member of the WB communications committee, shared her own victory experience. By passing out leaflets to alter a proposal that would significantly narrow a sidewalk along the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway, the group of volunteers successfully challenged the plan and a settlement was reached.

"It is so inspiring to actually see what a small group of committed people can do to change something," said Carvan.

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