

Watertown map shows new routes to walk

By Jen Thomas, staff writer

Wicked Local Watertown

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WATERTOWN — If it's not a scenic stroll along the Charles River, then it's a quiet walk through Mt. Auburn Cemetery.

As spring approaches, Watertown residents will return to their favorite walking spots. And thanks to a local volunteer, there may be a few new must-see spots to hit.

Jeannette Belcher-Schepis, the Safe Routes to School coordinator, worked with WalkBoston to create a walking map that features more than 17 routes in 5-minute increments.

"There are a lot of good sidewalks in Watertown, and it's really a beautiful place to get out and walk around," said Belcher-Schepis.

In addition to the usual riverfront walks, the map highlights walking routes through the town's commercial areas and major attractions, like Gore Place and Ridgelawn Cemetery. Watertown joins more than a dozen other local communities with walking maps.

The map was funded by Tufts Health Plan.

Director of Community Development and Planning Steven Magoon said Watertown is known for its pedestrian friendliness, and the map highlights some of the best areas for a stroll.

"I like to walk, and I find Watertown a pretty easy place to get around," Magoon said.

Well-maintained sidewalks and easy accessibility to stores and other community hotspots top the list of reasons of what makes Watertown so walkable.

On Walkscore.com – an online tool that measures a community's walkability by using an algorithm to measure how far a given location is from amenities – gives Watertown an average score of 77 percent, which correlates to "Very Walkable." Locations closer to Watertown Square earn a rating of 85 percent or higher.

A May event and townwide walk to coincide with the Massachusetts Walk to School Day is planned to celebrate the map.

Belcher-Schepis, who began the Safe Routes to School program in 2006 at the Lowell Elementary School, kicked off Walking Wednesdays this week, where students at the three elementary schools walk from designated neighborhood "walking bus stops."

About 400 students in Watertown participate in the walking program.

The program aims to educate children on pedestrian safety, make students and their parents more physically active and to reduce traffic around schools.

Belcher-Schepis said she is planning a number of walking events in the spring, including the launch of a walking survey near the end of the school year that might help determine ways to get more people walking.

"I personally don't see too many obstacles to walking," Belcher-Schepis said.

But parents' concerns about the safety of the town's streets sometimes keep students from participating in the walking program.

"Parents concerns over speed is probably the main obstacle," Belcher-Schepis said.

Magoon also said curbs and sidewalks in need of improvement – and people who park on the sidewalk – are a hindrance to increased walkability.

Get a copy of the map

The new walking map of Watertown is available for free at Town Hall, 149 Main St. If you don't see one lying around, try the office of Planning Director Steve Magoon. You can also visit www.walkboston.org for maps of nearby towns.

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