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Finding 'Safe Routes' for Stoneham

By Ben Swasey/Correspondent

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Stoneham -

It would be very hard to find someone who knows how to walk around Stoneham better than Hilary Celentano.

The town resident, who admittedly walks 11 miles a day for fun, was recently appointed Community Safe Routes to School Coordinator for Stoneham.

The position was created with a grant from the Executive Office of Transportation, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. WalkBoston, a nonprofit organization with a mission to "make communities more walkable," is appropriating and administering the grant.

The goal is pertinent for a town with some pedestrian issues. In an earlier article, the *Sun* cited a report that Stoneham is ranked 252 out of 351 in the state for pedestrian safety and that the intersection of Elm and Main streets is one of the worst 10 in Massachusetts.

For the energetic and effusive Celentano, the role will allow her to spread her own habits for the good of the community.

"There's nothing more that I want for the community than for everyone to be out walking," she said. "There are only a few of us out there [walking] and we ask, 'where is everyone?' People aren't looking at our resources, but Stoneham is beautiful — we have so much to offer."

The grant originated in the spring, led by a strong contribution from Central School Principal Larry MacElhiney. MacElhiney indicated that Stoneham had been working with the Safe Routes program for a few years, but an increase in efforts was desired.

"The emphasis for the grant was to broaden what was being done to foster more community-based walking," said MacElhiney. "We saw an opportunity to hire a local coordinator."

Celentano agreed with the necessity of her position, saying, "The program had kind of run its course. They had tried all the elements and they were looking for something new with new ideas; something that would get people out there and would be fun."

MacElhiney, who penned the "Community Safe Routes Grant," interviewed and then recommended Celentano for hire to WalkBoston.

The principal's efforts also coincided with a spring forum organized by Town Administrator David Ragucci, in which the buzzword was again walkability.

"We were trying to collaborate with small businesses in town," said Ragucci. "For a downtown to be successful, it has to be walkable. [Our efforts] go hand-in-hand with the grant."

Safe Routes program goals

Celentano's occupational mandate is to overcome obstacles to walking as an alternative and to promote safe walking habits, with the main goal focused towards children on their way to and from school.

Already, Celentano has made her presence known with a series of public service announcements, initiatives and events.

“The more that is done and the more that we talk about it,” Celentano said, “the more we’ll build on walking and bring awareness to the cause.”

She has plotted maps of the schools to include where crossing guards are located so that students can pinpoint where they live and converge, with classmates, on similar routes. Going forward, Celentano hopes to create “walking school buses” maneuvered by rotating parent leaders. Parents are starting to volunteer for this system, indicated Celentano.

In late summer, she organized a few walks around Lake Quannapowitt in Wakefield and initiated a local chapter of Prevention Magazine’s “28 Day” health campaign.

In mid-September, Celentano began a scavenger hunt to increase foot traffic to local businesses. She placed four color-coded and decorated ballet slippers in four shops around town. Thus far, as of last week, three have been discovered, but the fourth, a blue/purple slipper representing athleticism, is still out there, with the clue that it is “freezing.” Scavenger hunt winners receive gift certificates to Play It Again Sports and Book Oasis.

‘Walking Wednesdays’ kickoff

Last Wednesday was the kickoff to the first of six “Walking Wednesdays.” Trinkets will be given out to students who participate in this weekly effort. Celentano was very pleased with the turnout, or lack thereof, rather, in regards to the few cars populating school driveways.

These Wednesdays will prep for two events in the next week. This Friday, Walk-Boston will visit second-grade classrooms to offer a tutorial for children and interested parents alike, called “Cross the Street Curriculum.” Additionally, International Walk to School Day is on Wednesday, Oct. 8. Then, Safe Routes will join forces with the Stoneham Police Department as children create their own pedestrian street signs in the hopes of understanding the key elements of street-wise safety.

Beyond the events, MacElhiney stressed how Celentano and the town’s efforts will also be geared towards educating parents and the community-at-large. For example, MacElhiney wants parents to know that statistically, most accidents occur right around school, and so at particularly bad traffic schools like his Central and at South School, a reduction of cars would certainly be helpful. Furthermore, he hopes that all residents will take notice of Safe Routes, perhaps encouraging better shoveling of sidewalks during the winter months.

Celentano has taken control of a Web site, www.fearlesswalkers.com, for Safe Routes. The Web site was donated from resident Margaret Prendergast, who set it up for a project.

Together, Celentano, MacElhiney and Ragucci all believe that walking will have positive effects for the town — both in terms of residents’ well-being and business performance — but that safe and correct walking practices must first be learned and ingrained.

“I think it will have a positive impact, no question,” ended Ragucci. “There’s nothing but good things coming out of it — to create a new generation of walkers.”

“I want to see more harmony and unity in this, to bring in everyone to enjoy this program and to feel that they impacted this program,” said Celentano, before neatly echoing Ragucci: “I want to start a culture, and I want it to be a walking culture.”

For information, visit www.fearlesswalkers.com or www.walkboston.org.

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