Walk-to-school plan premiering in Brockville

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Students at Brockville’s Westminster Public School will be among the first to take part in a new walk-to-school program expected to be rolled out early in 2013.

The city’s Westminster School, as well as Naismith School in Almonte and a school-to-be-determined in Comwall, will be part of an “active-travel” pilot project being arranged by a regional steering committee of the Healthy Communities Partnership of Lanark, Leeds and Grenville.

Committee chairman Suzanne Rivard of Gananoque says the program will utilize lessons learned on similar programs in other jurisdictions and is designed to combat serious health problems creeping into young age groups.

“We need to get our children more physically active,” said Rivard, pointing to accelerating obesity rates among youngsters that lead to the early onset of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, arthritis and heart disease.

Walking outdoors is also a great stress reliever and enhances a person’s feeling of well-being, said Rivard.

Moreover, the program will provide a safe walking experience with adult supervisors taking charge.

In light of an incident Tuesday in Gananoque where a student walking home from school was approached by a strange man in a vehicle offering a ride, safety concerns are a priority, said Rivard.

Similarly, the program will also benefit the environment by cutting down on greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles being used to drive children to school, she said.

Rivard noted the program will be offered – at least initially – only to students not eligible to ride a bus, meaning those who live within 1.6km of their school.

She said many of those students are driven to school by their parents.

Rivard said the committee will begin collecting data from parents in the coming weeks with surveys to be sent home with Westminster students to determine common walking routes, preferred drop-off locations and other information that will determine how the plan is rolled-out.

For example, there could be several different walking routes established with multiple drop-off locations, depending on the data received.

Rivard said the plan has received strong support from the Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit as well as the Upper Canada District School Board.

“Without the school board’s support, there’s really not a whole lot we can do with this,” she said.

The proposal also received a strong endorsement by a Brockville council committee following a presentation by Rivard early this week.

Finance, administration and operations committee chairman David Beatty said a lack of physical activity is reducing the life expectancy of children to a level that is less than the previous generation.

City manager Bob Casselman added a word of caution about the committee’s request for increased involvement from planner Andrew McGinnis.

Acknowledging the program is “a great initiative,” Casselman worried that taking McGinnis away from more of his city responsibilities will leave a hole in the planning department.

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Suzanne Rivard poses in front of a crosswalk sign near Linkletter Public School in Gananoque on Thursday.