

MAYOR MARVIN'S COLUMN

Last week, Police Chief Satriale and I attended a Westchester County symposium for school, municipal and law enforcement officials that showcased Walk to School initiatives.

More than 110 school districts throughout New York State including nearby Pelham Manor, Rye, Pleasantville and Larchmont have launched walk to school programs. The chief and I both believe that because of the Village's small size and miles of sidewalks, we are ideally suited to return to our roots as a walking Village both for residents and students.

The walking initiatives have traditionally taken root in schools but for success on a Village wide level requires a cooperative effort with government and law enforcement. There is truly no downside to a program that we know results in a healthier population, a healthier environment and a cost savings.

For example, the increased emissions from autos around a school results in higher ground level ozone pollution that can act as a trigger for asthma and respiratory attacks especially in youngsters because their lungs are not fully developed.

According to government statistics, the number of children driven to a school within a one mile radius of their home was 20% in 1969. Now the number is over 55% and climbing. Scientists and researchers have correlated this increase with increases in traffic congestion, air pollution, childhood obesity and even the cognitive abilities of children to navigate their world.

Childhood obesity has tripled nationwide in the last 30 years and with it has come many detrimental health and social consequences.

There is also evidence that a morning walk increases alertness to start one's day that correlates with improved academic performance, greater self esteem and a sense of independence.

The air quality around schools has been in a steady decline and the irony is that the more cars in a school zone, the more dangerous it is for those who choose to walk.

There are many clever initiatives employed by area school districts and municipalities to encourage walking in their communities.

For example, the PTA in Pelham Manor bought all the second graders pedometers so they could keep track of their mileage. Pleasantville has "Walking Wednesdays" and many communities instituted the concept of "walking school buses".

This concept involves parents walking groups of students to locations to meet up with other parents and students along the route. Often school and Village officials, physical education teachers and high school leaders will join in the walks to encourage and supervise the younger children.

The “walking school buses” also help alleviate the safety concern many parents justifiably have about unsupervised walking. As pointed out in a recent New York Times article, the walk to school illustrates the conflict many parents feel between the desire to teach children independence while at the same time keeping them safe.

In the coming weeks, the Police Chief and I will be reaching out to school officials to see if we can combine forces to increase walking throughout our Village.

First, we can do our part by making sure privately owned and municipal sidewalks are in good repair and clean of ice, snow and debris.

In addition, we will educate our residents as to their responsibilities as conscientious drivers and pedestrians.

It is important all our citizens know the rules of a busy street.

As a reminder, legally pedestrians have the right of way within a marked crosswalk if there is no traffic light. If there is a traffic light, whoever has the green light, car or pedestrian, has the right of way. If crossing at an unmarked crosswalk, pedestrians do not have the right of way and must yield to vehicles.

It is always helpful to review safety tips at home especially with our youngest residents. Encourage them to always walk on the sidewalk and if there is a gap in the sidewalk, always walk facing traffic. In contrast, bicycles should always be ridden in the same direction as cars. Cross only at corners and always avoid jaywalking or crossing between parked cars. It is also so important to watch for cars exiting from the numerous driveways throughout the Village and do not push or chase friends anywhere near the street.

To do our part, the Villages’ police department will be especially vigilant in enforcing laws relating to speeding, cell phone usage while driving, failure to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks and the new State idling law. Under the provisions of the new law, all motor vehicles are prohibited from idling for more than three minutes.

We will also ensure that our crossing guards receive the most up-to-date training on safe practices.

We ask you, our residents, to help us by identifying locations in need of sidewalk repair or suggestions to make safer walking routes throughout the Village.

Our goal is ambitious. We hope to change attitudes and long term behavior and even alter some life-long habits about walking and driving and encourage our youngest citizens to realize the relationship of walking to a healthy life.