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Walk Wise

Hendersonville is site of pilot walking program that may be duplicated across the nation



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The Walk Wise, Drive Smart project wants to motivate people to walk regularly in their neighborhoods. On an organized walk in the Druid Hills area of Hendersonville last October, Elaine Verso, Helene Schenker, Carol Kershner and Dottie Matthews braved the rain with guides Joe Poole and Gary Eblen. special to tnw

One step at a time, Hendersonville walkers are leading the way for North Carolinians and the nation as they test a pilot program, Walk Wise, Drive Smart. Walk Wise, Drive Smart, a pedestrian safety program administered by the University of North Carolina's Highway Safety Resource Center at Chapel Hill, aims to promote senior walking programs, improve the health of citizens and help enhance the quality of life in small and mid-size towns and cities. "We heard Hendersonville would be a great place to begin," says Bill Hunter, senior research scientist at the Highway Safety Resource Center. "The focus is on communities of Hendersonville's size." Walk Wise, Drive Smart is funded by a three-year grant from the federal National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. It is also sponsored by the Governors Highway Safety Program and is affiliated with the NC Healthy Aging Research Network. Lessons learned in Hendersonville will be shared across the country. Another factor that helped Hendersonville be selected for the Walk Wise, Drive Smart pilot project is its age demographic. More than 31 percent of Hendersonville's population is age 65 or older. Since the project started in May 2006, 10 Hendersonville neighborhoods have been or are being assessed for walking. Now walking routes in each neighborhood, from Hyman Heights to Lake Osceola, are being developed that will benefit city residents of all ages. The first 1.5 mile route, designed to be safe for older adults, officially opened Dec. 6, a bitter cold day, in a downtown neighborhood near the Sammy Williams Center. The route begins at the Sammy Williams Center for Active Living, continues west on Third Avenue, turns north onto Whitted Street, east onto Fourth Avenue, south onto Main Street, and finally west onto Third Avenue. Yellow paint marks sidewalk cracks and other areas where walkers need to take extra care because of potential tripping hazards. Yellow apples with directional arrows mark the routes. Six more walking routes are slated to open by early spring. The project will continue through September of this year. Additional routes will be dedicated in Barker Heights, Druid Hills, Hyman Heights, Lake Osceola, Balsam Heights, the Hebron Road area, Haywood Forest, Maple Street/Green Meadows and the privately owned Carolina Village retirement property to connect with seniors. Routes vary from one to two miles, Hunter says. Some neighborhoods might have two or more Walk Wise, Drive Smart routes. Nationally, the issue of senior pedestrian safety has attracted attention as the ranks of Americans age 65 and older continue to increase. Walking has proven to help seniors maintain physical and mental well being and enables them to stay connected to their community. **Rain or shine**

Organized walks along a selected route take place on the first Thursday of every month, at varying times. On Jan. 3, one of Walk Wise, Drive Smart's 17 project partners, the Environmental and Conservation Organization co-sponsored a walk that was supposed to be downtown but wound up inside the Blue Ridge Mall because of bad weather. "I was so stunned at the vast mall walking culture," says Sam Lovelace, the On-Site Project Manager for Walk Wise, Drive Smart. "We'd love to get these people into the neighborhoods to walk, as well." The Walk Wise, Drive Smart walks go hand in hand with ECO's regular bird watching walks and naturalist-led hikes. "This is a great program, to encourage people to get out and walk -- the best form of exercise," says David Weintraub, Executive Director of ECO. "This is a walkable county. It's also great when there are people to talk about what's out there, too." The recent Healthy Aging Fair helped Walk Wise, Drive Smart reach out to seniors who might utilize the neighborhood pedestrian routes. **Surveying the neighborhoods**

Lovelace regularly walks the proposed routes to count pedestrians and interview residents. "The numbers give us a general idea of who is using the routes," says Lovelace. She walks once in the morning and again in the evening to get a balanced picture of how each route is being utilized and to determine what the traffic patterns or problems might be. During her walks Lovelace hands out free Walk Wise, Drive Smart raffle tickets with prizes from local artists and businesses. She occasionally gives raffle tickets out as rewards to drivers who make full stops at stop signs and slow down for pedestrians. She holds a raffle for each monthly organized walk. Raffle prizes include things like a gift certificate to Diamond Brand or a local H'ville coffehouse/eatery, a Walk Wise T-shirt or a craft. **Slow Down** Before a route is opened, the area is audited for problems like cracks in sidewalks and access for disabled citizens. "In any neighborhood, we need one safe route," Hunter says. "Dealing with old infrastructure and remarking pavement are some of the issues we run across. We won't open a route until the city addresses these issues." The program also regularly tracks the number of traffic incidents along each neighborhood route. "Crashes could go up simply because more people are walking," Hunter says. "Or, alternately, there could be less because safety has been emphasized." Over the last year and a half, a number of yellow-orange signs that

read 'Slow Down--Neighbors Walking,' have been distributed to neighborhood residents by Walk Wise, Drive Smart. Eventually, a Walk Wise, Drive Smart guidebook will be published to assist other towns and cities interested in implementing their own community walking programs. "The neighbors have been very helpful in our development of this project," Hunter says. "They're our best resource." "Slow Down--Neighbors Walking' signs are currently available for individual purchase at the Henderson County Council on Aging, a Walk Wise partner, located at 105 King Creek Boulevard just off Spartanburg Highway. "When you realize that almost a third of Hendersonville residents are older adults, then the importance of this work is clear," says Karen Smith, the council on aging's director. **CarFit on the horizon**

In May at the Blue Ridge Mall another arm of the program - CarFit - will help seniors adjust mirrors and seats in their cars and offer safety tips. For more information about Walk Wise, Drive Smart, visit www.walk-wise.org or call Sam Lovelace at 864-457-6166.
