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Farmington Municipal School District is extending its bus transportation to students residing within legal walking distance to schools because of hazardous walking conditions identified by the district's transportation department.

According to the New Mexico Transportation Division, "No school bus route shall be maintained for lesser distance than one mile one way for students in grades kindergarten through six; one and one-half miles one way for students in grades seven through nine; and two miles one way for students in grades 10 through 12."

The identification of hazardous walking conditions, which can include busy intersections, heavy traffic, and no sidewalks, allows for a student to be transported to school by a school bus even though they live within walking distance from a school.

Walking routes to schools are evaluated every five years to determine whether the routes are safe, according to Farmington Schools Transportation Supervisor Billy Huish, who said the district works with the Farmington's Public Works and Police Departments to complete the study.

The walking route conditions are then presented to the Farmington School Board and the state transportation director, so they may improve extended bus routes.

Those new bus routes, approved by the board during the July 11 meeting, include:

- Hines Road and U.S. Hwy 64, near Bluffview Elementary School, because there are no sidewalks and students must walk through irregular vehicle traffic and across parking lots.
- Wildflower Parkway and Wildflower Mesa Drive, near Esperanza Elementary School and Mesa View Middle School, because there are no sidewalks and the shoulder is not wide enough to provide a safe walking area.
- Lower La Plata Highway, Twin Peaks and Troy King Road, near the new Tibbetts Middle School building, because there are no sidewalks.

If any of these walking routes are improved in the future, the extended bus routes will be discontinued, according to the State Transportation Division.

Most walking conditions to the district's schools are safe, said Anngela Wakan, Farmington Safe Routes to School director. "There is pretty good infrastructure and we are working to make it better because we are in the process of getting grants to get more sidewalks," she said.

If students live near their schools and the walking conditions are safe, Wakan encourages them to walk to school. "I think having kids walk safely to school helps their health and allows for them to get to know their neighbors better. I think it helps Farmington be a better community," Wakan said.

Safe Routes to School is trying to start "walking school buses" where "at each of the elementary schools, adults or volunteers will take turns walking with their kids and picking up other kids along the way," Wakan explained. "Parents are concerned for their children's safety and having an adult present will help with those concerns."

Other activities being organized by Safe Routes to School include a "Bike Rodeo," or bike safety course, at Sycamore Park Community Center and the Walk Across America program, where students keep track with a punch card of how many times they walk to school. "At the end of the year, we will have a pool party for anyone who participated," Wakan said.

For more information about the Safe Routes to School program, visit the website farmingtonwalkandroll.org.

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