

# **Teen Transportation Choice Study**

**A project of Green Wheels funded by Humboldt Community for  
Activity and Nutrition**

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## Teen Transportation Choice Study Report

### Purpose

In the past 30 years, transportation to school for elementary school aged children has shifted from predominately walking and biking to being chauffeured by parents. In Humboldt County 66%<sup>1</sup> of students are driven to school. While researchers have focused on surveying parents of young children Green Wheels sees immense potential studying teen transportation from the perspective of teens. Unlike young children teenage independence is commensurate with the responsibilities of active transportation. The purpose of this study was to assess the attitudes and behaviors teens have about transportation to school and to understand the decision making process for school transportation.

### Scope of the Study

All students, with adequate parent permission, were asked to a) complete a survey, and b) participate in a focus group (see Appendices). The survey assessed teen behaviors about frequency and mode of transportation to school, and home location identified on a map or by writing nearest cross-streets or town. The focus groups were small (6-10 participants) and designed to learn how teens think about transportation and to understand their role in that decision. Focus group participant selection was based on survey results and parent permission.

The target population was freshmen high school students from three distinct built environments: 1) Hoopa Valley High School (HHS) – a rural environment, 2) Eureka High School (EHS) – a semi-urban environment, and 3) McKinleyville High School (MHS) a semi-suburban environment. We anticipated that these three diverse settings would present unique enablers and barriers to active transportation as well as reveal common experiences independent of location.

### Challenges

Access to the schools and adapting to each school's bureaucracy posed challenges, especially regarding focus group participant recruitment. Neither HHS nor MHS students returned permission forms. However, both schools allowed focus groups with mixed-age leadership students. Our timeline was incompatible with MHS and we were unable to hold a focus group there.

**Focus Groups**

At EHS we received a successful 13 completed permission forms from which focus group participants were selected. We believe that focus group recruitment at EHS was successful due to the study team distributing the surveys explanation of the study. Participants were selected by distance from school (within one mile), gender (male/female balance), and mode of transportation (active and non-active). (Table 1)

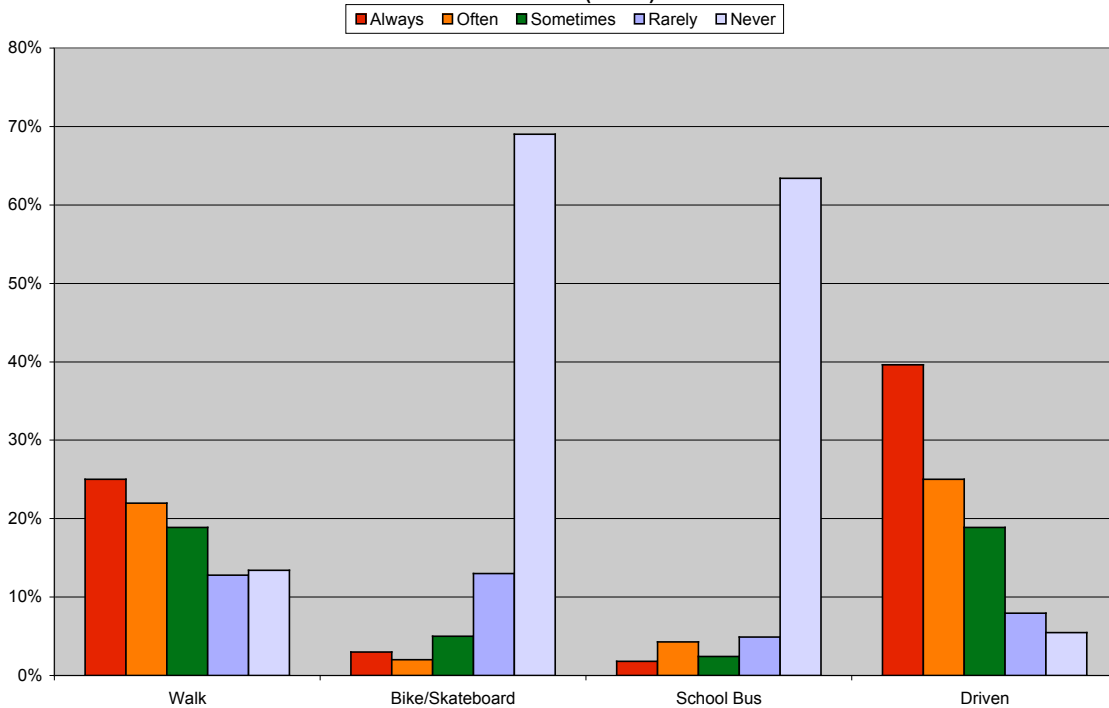
Table 1: Eureka High School Focus Group Participant Demographics

	Gender	Primary Mode of Transportation	Secondary Mode of Transportation
1	Male	Walk	Driven by Parent
2	Female	Walk	
3	Female	Driven by Parent	Walk
4	Female	Driven by Parent	Walk
5	Female	Walk/Driven by Parent	
6	Female	Driven by Parent	Walk/Carpool
7	Female	Walk	Driven by Parent
8	Male	School Bus	Driven by Parent/Carpool

**Survey Results**

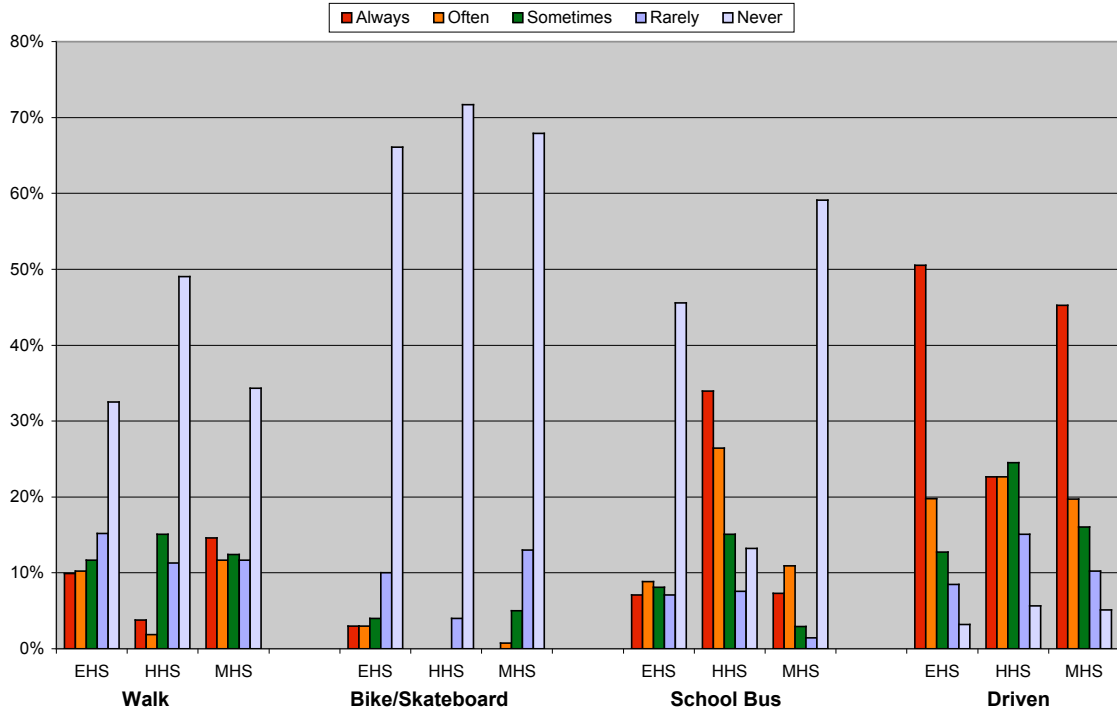
We collected a total of 473 surveys, (283 EHS, 137 MHS and 53 HHS). The overall, three schools combined, results of the survey indicated that the dominate mode of transportation for freshmen living within one mile from school was being driven by a parent/guardian. (Table 2)

Table 2 Freshmen Living within One-Mile Mode of Transportation  
All Schools (n=164)



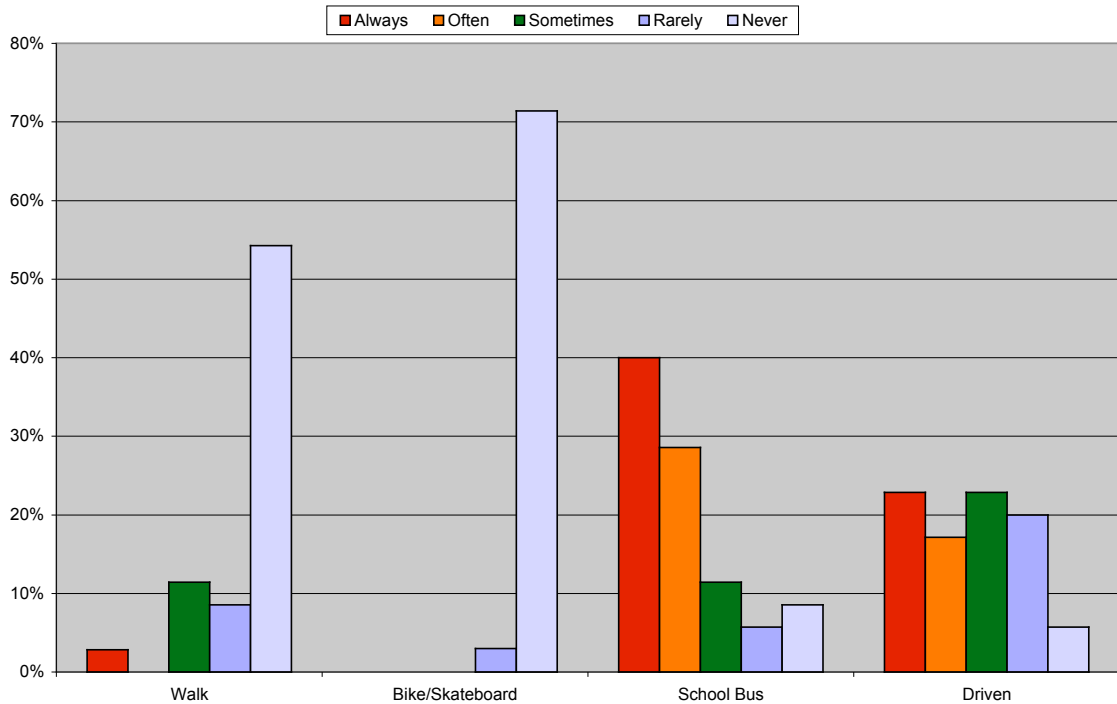
This trend was also true for EHS and MHS freshmen living more than one mile from school. (Table 3)

**Table 3 Freshmen Mode of Transportation**  
Eureka High School (EHS) Hoopa High School (HHS) McKinleyville High School (MHS)

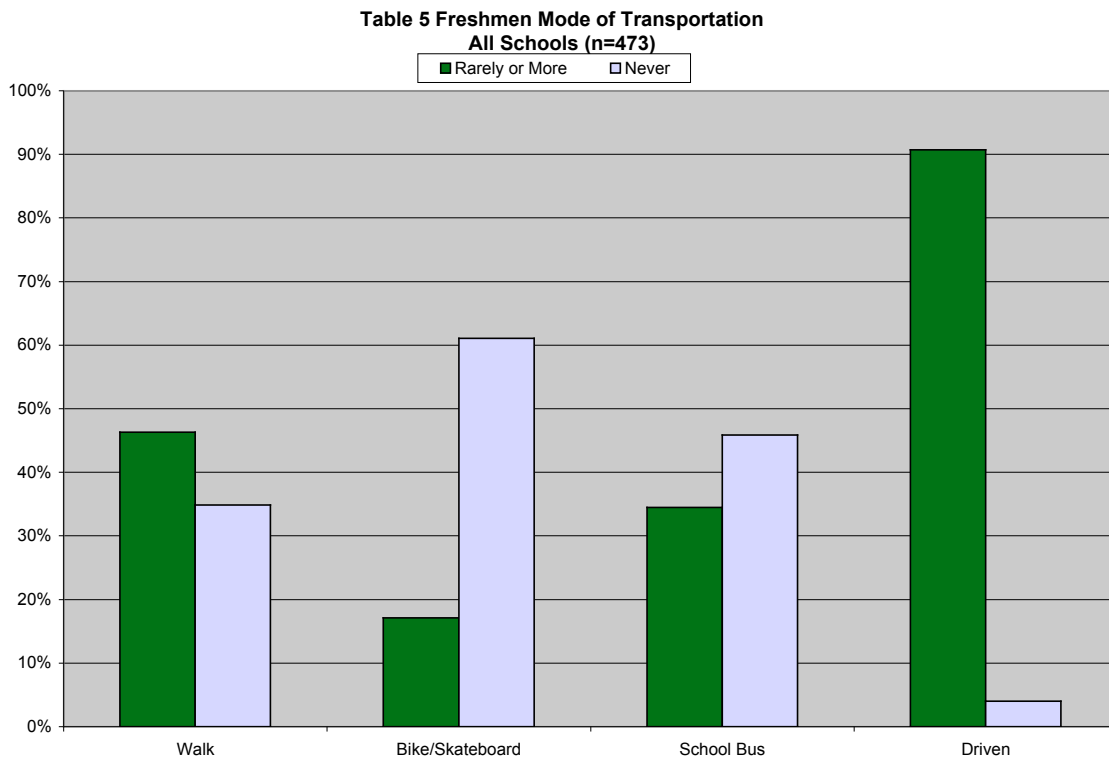


At HHS, the dominant mode of transportation for freshmen living more than one mile from school was the school bus. (Table 4)

**Table 4 Freshmen Living Beyond One-Mile Mode of Transportation**  
Hoopa High School (n=35)



We also discovered that freshmen living within one mile, walking “rarely” or more frequently was more likely than “never” walking. (Table 5)



At Eureka and McKinleyville the second mode of transportation used “always” overall was walking. (Table 3)

## Focus Group Results

### How Transportation Decisions are Made

Students were asked how decisions were made about how they got to and from school – that is, did they have a discussion with their parents and did they play a role in that discussion. The common response was “I ask my parents for a ride”. Participants shared that the decision making process was generally “routine”, with the student asking to be driven as their first choice. If their request was not granted, they were forced to choose other modes of transportation, “If my mom says no, I have to take the bus, [or walk]”. In addition, EHS students perceived being driven as the norm for the majority of their peers, including seniors.

Another common theme at both schools was how family structure and car economics affected their ability to be driven or to drive, in the case of HHS. Each family member’s schedule determined the timing compatibility of receiving a ride to school. Siblings provided opportunities and competition for rides to school. Students acknowledged the economics of driving, mainly the cost of gasoline. Students at HHS talked about car economics more frequently, maybe due to the focus groups having a mixed-age group that included students learning to drive or already driving, or students living greater distances from school there by making gasoline expenses proportionately larger.

### Eureka Teen Attitudes and Experiences Concerning Biking and Walking

Students commonly walked as a result of being denied a ride to school but described the experience with positive images, “It says my parents trust me”, “People think I exercise”. But the dominant topic of conversation was walking safety.

The students knew people who had been “jumped”, robbed, or stabbed. Some overcome their fears by walking in a certain area: “I don’t walk on the sidewalk I walk in the street so that I’m seen, in case anything happens to me”. Students told anecdotes about how their parents were afraid to let them walk, or gave them safety advice that reinforced the student’s fears. Students referred to good and bad neighborhoods, level of homelessness in an area, “ghetto” neighborhoods.

Biking was not a common mode of transportation used by freshmen for commuting to school. Students did not understand how to safely use infrastructure: biking in the wrong direction to make eye contact with on-coming drivers, whether to stop at stop signs, and biking on sidewalks, “Yeah there’s a bike lane but I don’t ride in it because there are cars.”

Students shared that images are associated with biking and bike styles. At EHS the bike culture is BMX and mountain bike riders and they are associated with skateboarding and doing tricks. From the student’s perspective certain bikes are cool but all other bike styles are un-cool. For EHS students, bike style is a barrier to biking. “If you have an old, older peoples bike like the big ones, it’s like, not as good and more people make fun of you.” One female student expressed a desire to own a bike that reflected her style, “I want a Tiffany bike”. Another female student shared that “they hurt her”. In general the group did not have confidence in their physical capacity to use active transportation with wheels.

### Hoopa Teen Attitudes and Experiences

For most HHS students, distance and terrain limit options for active forms of transportation like biking and walking. As a result, going by car or bus are the dominant modes of transportation. However, the student’s experiences and attitudes about transportation did inform potential enablers for promoting active transportation. The participants described the merits of driving in terms that are easily attributed to other modes of travel: a sense of independence, getting there on your own time, listening to your own music, being in control, not having to wait on somebody, and the freedom to leave when you want. All of these could be described as the merits of biking and walking. However, our survey results did show that walking is common among freshmen. Living within and beyond one mile, 15 freshmen (4%) walk to school with some frequency. The HHS student’s general attitude towards active transportation was that it wasn’t possible in Hoopa but they perceived other locations as more conducive, “In Eureka it would probably be nice to ride your bike or walk or that kind of stuff.”

Hoopa students did not associate a negative perception or image with students who used active transportation. In fact, students felt that their community had a culture of inclusiveness. They resisted the language of “image” and the idea of a status being associated with the different modes of transportation saying, “nobody cares (how you get to school)”. These students didn’t judge their peers on how they were getting to and from school and agreed that “there aren’t really groups here”, “well kinda but we all associate with each other”.

## **Informing the Next Steps**

### Recommendation for Eureka

Although changing teens decision-making process about transportation is challenging, we can make biking a valid option by addressing the barriers stated by focus group participants. Local active transportation organizations and clubs are interested in offering educational workshops. These workshops could target teens living within biking distance to school and cover the identified barriers: using infrastructure, bike styles, fitting and comfort, and choosing a bike route. Ultimately, programs could be developed that help teens acquire a bike through bike shops, such as a “Bike Library” or a similar program. Many EHS focus group participants were unaware of the school bus schedule or routes (e.g., “Where does it go?”). Workshops on biking could concomitantly educate teens on using the bus and planning walking routes.

To increase walking in Eureka the community can improve the safety of our neighborhoods, and educate walkers to build their confidence. We should consider surveying teens who live within a walkable radius of the school to identify the neighborhoods where they feel unsafe and hear how teens think their neighborhoods could be improved. Hands on projects that bring residents together to beautify their neighborhood reinforces the perception that an area is looked after and used as public space, and strengthens neighborhoods and draws attention to the students who walk.

### Working Towards Active Transportation in Hoopa

In Hoopa, an alternative facility to state highway 69 could improve walking safety and help increase the number of walkers. Students and community members would benefit from trails, designated pathways, or routes that function as safe routes. In the Hoopa area there are five schools that would benefit from such infrastructure changes. While a trails approach would be the jurisdiction of the County, involvement of HCAOG, the Hoopa City Government, an advisory committee, and community workshops to identify potential trail connectivity would be imperative to the success of the project given the expressed culture of inclusiveness in the community. Trail building and maintenance can be a grassroots effort that would encourage teen leadership and familiarize students with using trails as their route to school. Green Wheels has had great success recruiting volunteers to help community trail building in collaboration with the Trails Trust of Humboldt Bay.

Hoopa focus group participants shared an interesting range of perspectives on taking the bus. Their experiences suggest that the school bus is an important place for social development. However, it may be that high school seniors reach a social development ceiling, in that their interactions are limited to individuals younger or of the same age and all of the same social network, school. If true, there may be developmental benefits to integrating the high school bus system with public transit, where a greater cross section of our community would be accessible by our young adults.

Culture shifting is an important piece of this work. Many of the above stated projects require student participation and leadership. We must show teens that our adult culture values youth participation and recognizes applied knowledge as a meaningful form of education. Our schools should consider integrating these types of projects into current curriculum and allow students to receive course credit.

An important piece of promoting active transportation should be encouraging student lead projects to catalyze the critical mass needed to attract greater participation from their peers. In addition to intuitional encouragement, parents are potential allies in promoting active transportation. Parents may feel obligated to chauffeur their teen to school, as one students stated, “It means my parents love me” but students do use active transportation when their parents are unwilling or unable to drive them. Educating parents on how they serve as both a barrier to active transportation and an enabler of driving is an important strategy to consider in conjunction with addressing the concerns and interests teens have in active transportation.

Research Team and Contributors: **Ashley Hanson**, Interim Program Director, Green Wheels, **Chris Rall**, Field Organizer, Transportation for America; **Dorina Espinoza**, PhD, Health Education Specialist, Public Health Branch of Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services; **Dr. Tina M. Manos**, Graduate Coordinator, Humboldt State University Department of Kinesiology; **Chrissy Motzny**, HSU Kinesiology Student; **Dawn Arledge**, Teen Safety Educator, Department of Health and Human Services; **Jennifer Lane**, Principal, Hoopa Valley High School; **Kevin Scheffler**, Assistant Principal, Eureka High School; **Christine Vahldick**, Assistant Principal, McKinleyville High School

<sup>i</sup> Rall, Chris. “Teen Transport, Why Choose What?” Community Wheel [Humboldt County CA] Summer 2009: pg.5 Dataset from Department of Health and Human Services - Public Health Branch

# Appendices

**TEEN TRANSPORTATION CHOICE SURVEY  
NOTIFICATION AND WITHDRAWAL FORM  
2009-2010 SCHOOL YEAR**

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Your teen is being asked to take a brief 5-minute survey (Teen Transportation Choice Survey) at school about how they get to and from school. Participants in the survey will be entered into a raffle for gift certificates to Coming Attractions Theaters. The survey is part of a larger study being done by Green Wheels, a non-profit organization in Arcata, with assistance from Humboldt State University and Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services. The study is intended to understand teens' choices and attitudes about getting to and from school and will help guide improvement of transportation choices for high school students in Humboldt County. Please read this form for information about the survey and instructions on permission for your teen to take the survey. *If you do not want your teen to complete the survey, you must notify your school.*

**Survey Content.** The survey gathers information on approximate home location and how your teen gets to and from school. You may request a copy of the survey from Green Wheels by calling (707) 633-4488.

**It is Voluntary.** Your teen may choose not to take the survey. Students who take the survey only have to answer the questions they want to answer and they may stop at any time.

**It is Confidential.** The completed survey forms and data will be kept by Green Wheels in a locked cabinet. The surveys will only be viewed and used by the study team for conducting the analysis and report writing. No individual or identifiable data will be available to the schools or the community; however schools will receive a report summarizing the information. Surveys will be destroyed after 5 years.

**Taking the Survey.** The survey will be given during the week of January 24. It will only take about 5 minutes to complete and will be given in your teen's class.

**Potential Risks.** There are no known risks of physical or psychological harm to your teen. The school's counseling services will be available to answer any personal questions that may materialize.

**For Further Information.** Contact Chris Rall at (707) 834- 5495.

**Survey Withdrawal Form**

*If you do not want your teen to complete the survey, you must notify your school by returning this form.*

*I **do not give permission** for my teen to participate in the “Teen Transportation Choice Survey.”*

Parent/Legal Guardian’s printed name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/ Legal Guardian’s Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Teen’s printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teen’s Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

***(please return completed form to your teacher by Jan. 22)***

## TEEN TRANSPORTATION CHOICE SURVEY

This survey is designed to gather information about how you get to and from school and how far away you live from school. Your participation in taking this survey is voluntary and you may choose to not answer some questions or stop at any time.

**Gift certificates will be raffled off to 9<sup>th</sup> graders who complete this survey.**

**Please do not write your name on this survey.**

**Your Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Female/Male:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Your Teacher:** \_\_\_\_\_

How do you get to and from school over the course of the school year? For EACH way of getting to school, mark one box.					
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Bike					
Walk					
Skateboard					
School Bus					
Public Transit					
Driven by Parent/Guardian/Sibling					
Carpool					
Other: _____					

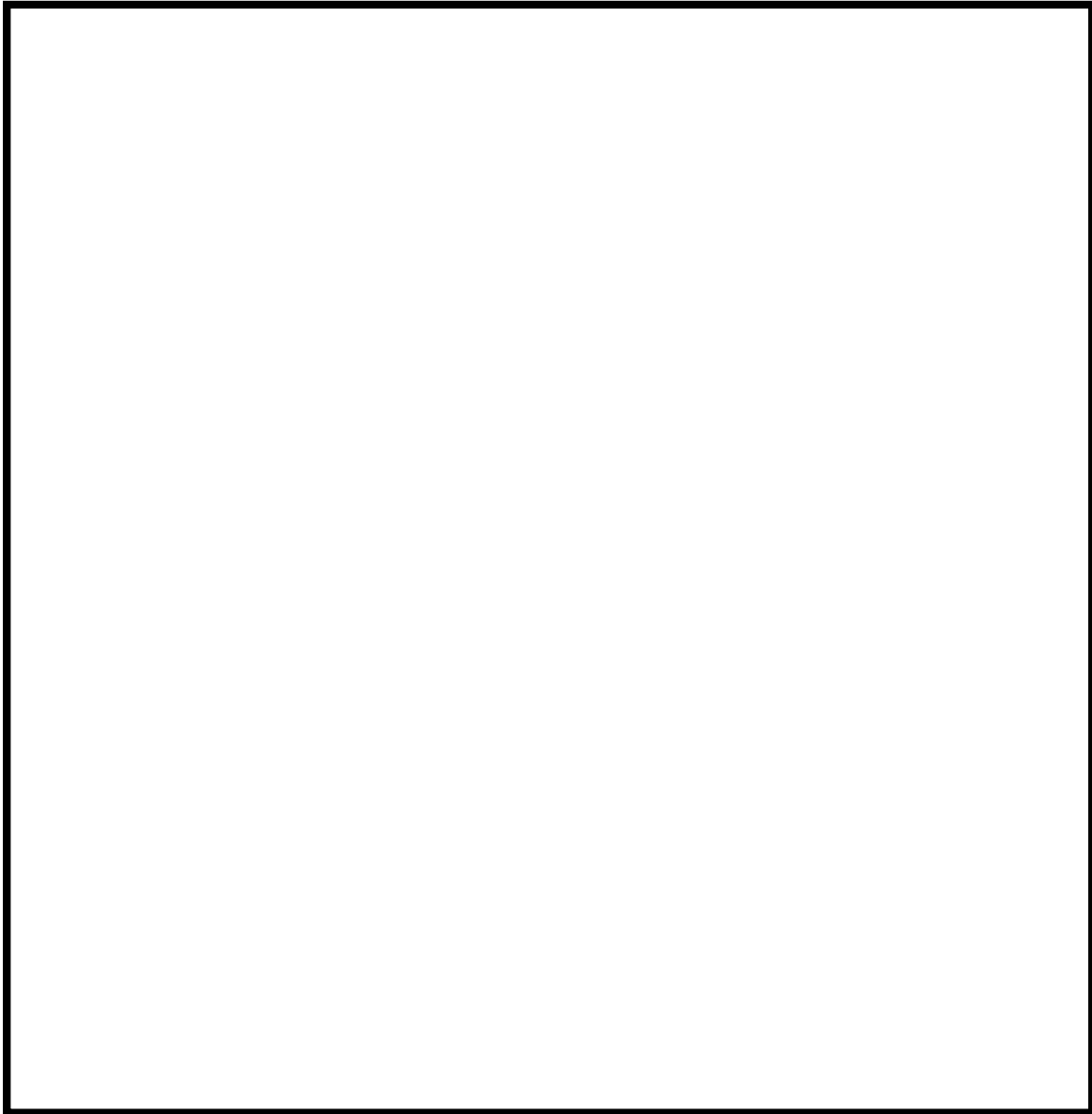
**PLEASE COMPLETE THE REST OF THE SURVEY ON THE BACK OF THIS PAGE.**

### YOU MAY ALSO BE ELIGIBLE TO WIN AN MP3 PLAYER

If you are interested in participating in a focus group that further explores how 9<sup>th</sup> graders get to and from school please see the next page for more information. Your parent or guardian will need to complete the “Consent to Act as Research Subject” on the attached page and you will need to return the form to your teacher. If you are chosen to be in a focus group you will be eligible to win a MP3 player. Please note that not everyone who is interested will be contacted.

**H01**

Below is a map of the community around your school. If you live within the boundaries of this map please indicate with a large X the general location of your house.



If you cannot locate your house on this map, please provide the general location of your home.

Street Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Closest intersection: \_\_\_\_\_

Nearest Town: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return the survey to your teacher and redeem your raffle ticket for a gift certificate. Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey.

## CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT TEEN TRANSPORTATION FOCUS GROUPS

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Your teen is being asked to participate in a focus group to be held after school. A focus group is an informal discussion around a set of pre-determined questions. The questions are about 9<sup>th</sup> graders thoughts on how they get to and from school. Information gathered from the focus groups will be used to identify attitudes and perspectives teens have towards common ways of getting around. Participation in the focus groups is voluntary on the part of the student. A total of 24 eligible 9<sup>th</sup> grade students will be randomly selected to participate in the focus groups. As a thank you for returning this consent form to make your teen available for the study, we will raffle off gift certificates to Coming Attractions Theatres. For teens who are selected and participate in the study, we will be raffling off an MP3 player to one student in each of the two focus groups (of 8 to 12 participants) held at your teen's school.

**Survey Content.** The focus group gathers information on transportation options for teens to and from school and teen attitudes towards transportation options. You may request a copy of the focus group questions from Green Wheels by calling 707-633-4488.

**It is Voluntary.** Your teen may choose to not participate in the focus groups. Students who do participate only have to answer the questions they want to answer and they may stop participating at any time.

**It is Confidential.** The focus group discussion will be audio recorded and transcribed. The recordings and transcripts will have no information on them that would lead to the identity of participants. Green Wheels will keep identifiable data in a locked file cabinet. Non-identifiable data will be available to the team conducting the study, for analysis and report writing. No individual or identifiable data will be available to the schools or the community; however schools will receive a report summarizing the information. Audio recordings and transcripts, from the group sessions will be destroyed after 5 years.

**Participating in Focus Groups.** The focus groups will be held during "Club Days" on February 17 at school and will require about 1 hour of your teen's time. A total of only 24 eligible 9<sup>th</sup> grade students will be randomly selected from the school and will be contacted to participate in the focus groups. A total of only 24 eligible 9<sup>th</sup> grade students will be randomly selected from the school and will be contacted to participate in the focus groups.

**Potential Risks.** There are no known risks at this time.

**Potential Benefits.** Your teen is not expected to get any direct benefits as an individual. Their participation will contribute to an understanding of teen transportation choices that affect teen health and safety, school congestion and other issues.

**Additional Information.** Contact Chris Rall of Green Wheels at 707-834-5495, [christopherjrall@gmail.com](mailto:christopherjrall@gmail.com). You may also contact Dr. Tina Manos at 707-826-5962 [tina.manos@humboldt.edu](mailto:tina.manos@humboldt.edu), Department of Kinesiology, or Juan Carlos Morales, Director, Humboldt State University Sponsored Programs 707-826-4190, [jcm215@humboldt.edu](mailto:jcm215@humboldt.edu).

**Consent:** Your signature below indicates your consent to allow your teens' voluntary involvement in the focus groups.

I understand that my teen's participating in this research is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw my teen from the study at any time without jeopardy. I understand that the investigator may terminate my teen's participation in the study at any time. I understand that my teen will

not receive any compensation for participating in this research, but he/she will be entered into a raffle for an MP3 player.

I give informed consent for my teen to participate in this study.

Parent/Legal Guardian's printed name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/ Legal Guardian's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Teen's printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teen's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Teen's Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

***(please return completed form to your teacher by Fe3)***

## Facilitator's Script

### **Introductory Statement from Moderator (~5 minutes)**

“Hello everyone. Thanks for coming today. My name is [*facilitator*] and I am helping Green Wheels conduct this research project to understanding how you feel about how you get to and from school. This is our note taker, she is going to introduce herself then I'll tell you more about what we're going to do this hour.

Hi, My name is [note taker] I'm going to be taking notes, it's just another way for us to capture information.

Great. So, what we're doing today is a focus group, a focus group is a tool used by all kinds of organizations. It's commonly used by corporations before they releases a new product. They hold a focus group to understand what people think about it.

We want to understand what you think about the transportation options you have for getting to and from school. Your input will help us understand how you make this choice.

This is an informal discussion, so please feel free to talk to each other and give input as we go along. The main thing is to be honest about your views on each topic because you're the experts and we really want to hear what you think. Remember, there are not right or wrong answers, so, please feel free to agree or respectfully disagree with what other participants say.

As you can see, I will be recording the discussion.

[points to the recorder and microphone]

This is so that I will have an accurate record of what was said. Everything discussed today is completely confidential, any written transcription will not include your name. Please try to speak one at a time and try not to interrupt anyone else while he or she is speaking.

Your participation in this discussion is voluntary, and if at any time you do not feel comfortable, you are free to leave. There are no personal risks to you for participating in this discussion.

I'd like to give each of you a chance to introduce yourself. Would each of you please tell the group your first name and where you live.

[everyone has a chance to respond]

Nice to meet all of you. So, the discussion will last for approximately one hour. Let's begin. [*switch on audio recorder*]

## **Focus Group Questions (~ 45 minutes)**

*[In addition to typical probe questions, such as:*

- Would you explain further?
- Would you give an example of what you mean?
- Would you say more?
- Is there anything else?
- Please describe what you mean.
- I don't understand—help me understand.

*Specific probe questions are listed under each question below]*

### Ice Breaker question:

*Each mode is answered by students in a popcorn style.*

**1. Imagine you are going to or from school. What words or phrases first come to mind when you hear these words:**

**“bus”**

**“walk”**

**“bicycle”**

**“car”**

### Explanatory Questions:

**2. What are some of the reasons you and other 9<sup>th</sup> graders get to and from school in the way that you do?**

*What makes [walking, biking, skating, getting driven, riding the bus] [easy and difficult]?*

**3. How are decisions made about how you or other 9<sup>th</sup> graders get to and from school?**

*Probes:*

*Is there a discussion?*

*Who is involved in that discussion?*

*What is your role in that discussion?*

**4. Is there an image associated with the people that use any of these modes?**

*Probes:*

*Is there an image associated with any of the modes you use?*

*Additional probe will focus on language:*

### Optional Question (if there is time)

Are there special resources you need in order to use any of these modes?

Concluding Question

**6. Is there anything we haven't discussed about 9<sup>th</sup> graders getting to and from school?**

**Closing Statement from Moderator (~ 3 minutes)**

“Well, we are just coming to the end of our time here. Thanks everyone for sharing your views with us. Your input has been very useful. Now that we're finished we can select a winner for the MP3 player.

*[answer any questions/switch off audio recorder]*