

# **THE NEIGHBORHOOD WALKABOUT**

## **An Important First Step in Designing a Safe Walk to School Program**

The following process is used by Greenest City's Active & Safe Routes to School (ASRTS) program as a method to identify the specific transportation and safety issues at school sites and to prepare a plan of action to deal with the identified issues. Input to this document has also been provided by the Way to Go! School Program in British Columbia.

Greenest City developed this process in its Toronto program. Other jurisdictions use similar processes and we have provided references to some of these.

### ***Why conduct a Neighborhood Walkabout?***

As you start work on your ASRTS project it is a good idea to have a clear understanding of the issues you are attempting to address. The most common reasons for schools wanting to implement an ASRTS program are:

- traffic congestion around the school that makes it unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists
- heavy traffic volumes and/or excessive speeds by motorists on streets around or near the school, making the journey to school unsafe
- children who are walking alone and may be victims of bullying or harassment, and are vulnerable to abduction

What you want to end up with is a good written description of the problem(s), aided visually with area maps. Maps can be obtained through the School Board or from your local Transportation Engineer. For example, what are the current parking allowances and restrictions, where does conflict between pedestrians/cyclists and vehicles occur and why is this happening. Out of this an action plan that everyone agrees to can be developed. Be sure to document who will do what and when. Agreed to timelines and follow-up meetings keep everyone on track.

It is also important to remember that plans can change so you need to build in some flexibility to your program.

### ***Identify the community stakeholders***

Start by identifying the stakeholders in your school community that can help you to implement a successful ASRTS program. This list is provided as a guide. In some jurisdictions there will be differences based on structures of school districts, who handles crossing guards, etc. You should adapt this list to suit your own circumstances.

Stakeholders may include:

- school administration (Principal, Vice-Principal and/or Teacher)
- parents and caregivers
- local police - many schools have liaison officers or traffic officers assigned to them
- school trustee
- local city or town councillor
- traffic engineer for your area
- representative from the local health unit
- a representative from the school board or district, to address busing issues or school site access and design
- students, particularly if student patrollers are utilized at the school site or have been involved in their own school site studies
- local resident's groups if conflict has arisen as a result of traffic congestion interfering with the flow of local traffic or residential parking

### ***Organize a neighborhood walkabout***

A neighborhood walkabout helps to identify and understand the safety issues around the school through direct observation of the problems. The walkabout should be

organized to coincide with pick-up or drop-off at the school. All stakeholders should be present and participate in the walkabout. Determine the scope of the walkabout before you begin, i.e. the area immediately surrounding the school or do you also need to investigate safety concerns further away.

Start by having the Principal or Parent representative give an overview of the issues and update the group on any history, i.e. recent 24 hour traffic/volume counts, results of previous traffic studies, what's been tried in the past, etc. Be sure to allow a few minutes for introductions to allow for identification of stakeholders.

Ask the attendees of the walkabout to sign in, giving their relevant contact information for future reference and for distribution of minutes, etc. Before you begin, designate someone to take minutes of the discussion, and encourage everyone to take their own notes of their observations to help with the discussion later.

Some things to consider during a walkabout. (The following list is adapted from Parent Safety Patrol Information Package, Parent Safety Patrol (Whitby), Whitby Community Police Office.) Your guide should be "**Safety over Convenience**":

#### *School Site:*

- The number of arrival and dismissal times at school
- School entrances for kindergarten students
- Teacher parking area/available visitor parking
  - Potential for vehicle and pedestrian conflict
  - Size and design of parking lot. Is traffic flow clearly signed?
  - Pavement markings on the parking lot
  - Parking and driving behaviour of driving parents
- Walking paths to the school

- Where are the access points for students
- Potential for conflict with vehicles
- Lighting along walkways
- Maintenance of walkways, i.e. snow and ice removed
- Alternate school grounds access routes
- Bicycle facilities
  - Bike racks
  - Bike paths or lanes
  - Potential for conflict with vehicles
- Location of School Bus Loading Zone, if applicable
  - Where do students wait for the buses; what type of supervision is employed
- Number of buses, vans and handicapped vehicles employed
- Location of garbage dumpsters and other school maintenance equipment
- Emergency vehicle access

#### *Areas Surrounding School Site:*

- Volume and speed of traffic on surrounding streets - perceived and real - obtain latest 24 hour counts
- Are there sidewalks? How far do they extend around the school and the surrounding community?
- Pedestrian crossing devices present and utilized
- Number and position of bus/student patrollers (if any-are they needed)
- Sight distances of school crossings to road curves and bus zones
- Number and position of adult crossing guards
- Placement of school crossings in relation to driveways and bus loading zones
- Timing of traffic lights
- On-street signs
- Providing a "Hand to Hand" area where parents of JK and SK students can take their children into the school

#### *Non-traffic related items to consider*

- Types of buildings surrounding school: residential, commercial, industrial

- Location of other public spaces near school: parks, community centres, libraries, churches
- Number of shade trees on streets
- Green space vs. concrete space
- Graffiti on buildings
- Physical state of the sidewalks
- Size of the sidewalks
- Garbage along the routes to school
- Obstructions on the sidewalks
- Block Parent or Neighborhood Watch community - if so, where are Block Parents located

There are a variety of checklists that have been prepared by other Safe Routes to School programs. We have provided the names of some below. They may assist you in preparing a neighborhood walkabout component for your program:

- Walkable America Checklist - available at [www.nsc.org/walkable.htm](http://www.nsc.org/walkable.htm). An excellent resource, available in both hardcopy and from their Web site. It provides information for a parent or teacher to take a walk with a child and assess together the walkability of their neighborhood. It also contains a walkability rating scale and provides advice on how to get identified problems resolved.
- The Safe Routes to School program in California, organized by the California Dept. of Health Services, has prepared a Walkability Checklist specifically for students to complete and they have had

it translated into four languages (Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese and Hmong). Copies can be obtained through California's Walk a Child to School Day Headquarters, toll-free 877-4-Safe-Rt or email at: [SafeRt@jba-cht.com](mailto:SafeRt@jba-cht.com)

- The Safe Routes to School program in the United Kingdom, organized by Sustrans, has excellent student walkability questionnaires. These have been designed for students of all ages, including high school. Refer to Frequently Asked Questions on [www.sustrans.org.uk/f\\_srs.htm](http://www.sustrans.org.uk/f_srs.htm).

### ***Document Findings and Report Back***

Add your findings from the walkabout to the map provided. Request that the Transportation Engineer include these findings in the master map. It may also be useful to provide photographs and a short report along with the map that outlines the problems identified and the proposed solutions. Decide who will create this report and when it will be ready. Distribute a copy of the report, photos and map to all the walkabout participants.

Sample maps from Mary Shadd Public School in Scarborough, Ontario, are provided at the end of this document. They show examples of pedestrian and vehicle volumes, parking restrictions, placement of pedestrian control devices, placement of road signs, etc.

**Success Stories:**

At **Holy Cross Catholic School** in East York, Ontario, the issue was poor air quality from traffic exhaust entering the parking lot level kindergarten windows. The traffic safety audit resulted in the installation of a chain link fence along the entire length of the parking lot. The fence prevents vehicles from parking next to the school thereby eliminating the indoor air quality problems, and also provides a safe route for students to cross the parking area.

The focus on traffic safety at **Allenby Public School** in Toronto, Ontario, resulted in the area being included in an Ontario pilot project referred to as Community Safety Zones.

The parent organized Safety Committee worked closely with the local police, their councillors and Toronto Transportation representatives to improve the safety of students travelling to and from school. Some of the changes made as a result of the Safety Zone include:

- Lowering the speed on Avenue Road, a major arterial road into downtown Toronto, from 50 km/hour to 40 km/hour during school drop off and pick up times.
- Moving pedestrian crossing areas to safer spots on the two residential streets bordering both sides of the school.
- Increasing the timing of traffic lights on Avenue Road and St. Clements Avenue to allow pedestrians longer to cross the road.
- Improving traffic signs around the school.
- Restricting parking in unsafe areas.
- Installing designated drop-off only areas on both sides of the school.



Changes made to a T-intersection in front of **Bowmore Public School** in Toronto to increase the visibility of pedestrians

**Praise for Neighborhood Walkabouts:**

According to the Principal at St. Michael's Catholic School in Toronto, "the walkabout was organized to deal with the largely urban community safety issues around: homeless people, drug dealers, lack of lighting, safety in the underground parking, restoration of the play structures to meet CSA code and the determination of a school bus loading zone. As a result of our City

*Councillor's intervention, many of these issues were resolved. The neighborhood walkabout organized by the school board and Greenest City has been a successful vehicle to implement the changes needed here at our site."*

The Vice-Principal at St. Roch Catholic School in North York, Ontario, commented: *"The parents and staff were concerned about a child being hit in the parking lot with the sheer volume and erratic flow of traffic. The traffic safety audit resulted in a redesign of the parking lot, correction of traffic markings and a plan for a drop off and pick up zone. A survey to identify the barriers to walking found the three biggest parental concerns to be: traffic volume, harassment/bullying and possibility of abduction. Since St. Roch introduced "Walking Wednesdays" and the "Golden Shoe Award", which goes to the class with the highest percent of students participating, children have been begging their parents to walk, not drive, them to school. The enthusiasm has been high: 270 children participated in "Walking Wednesday" on the 2nd Wednesday of the weekly program. The school continues to work with police and city representatives to make it safe to walk to school."*

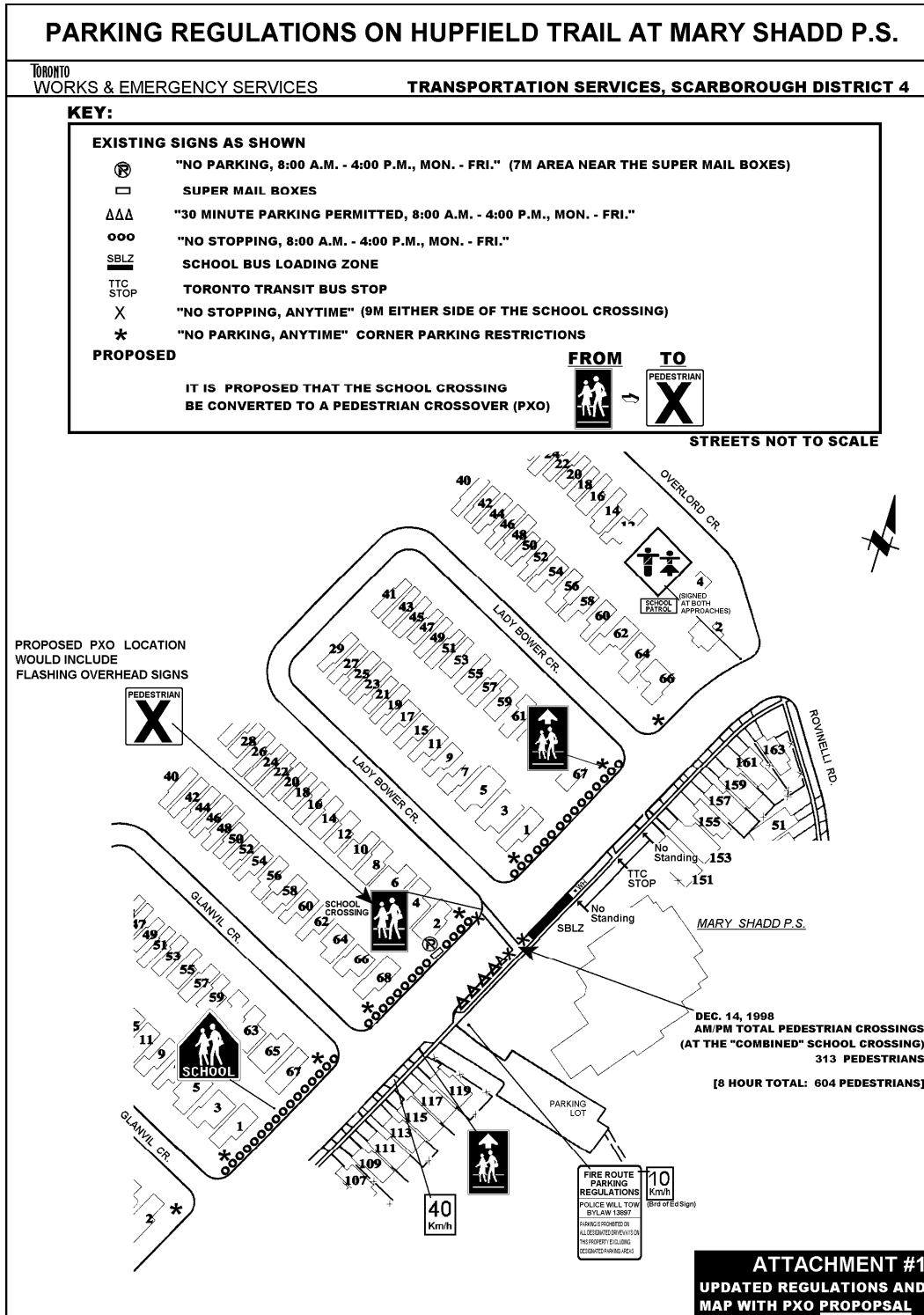
**Example Maps:**

*Mary Shadd Public School* conducted a neighborhood walkabout and a traffic study. Several hazardous areas were identified in front of the school including a TTC bus stop, a super mailbox and school crossings located in awkward spots. After a request was made to the TTC, the bus stop was moved further over; and a request has been made to Canada Post to relocate the super mailbox. The significant number of child pedestrians warranted the amalgamation of the school crossings into one school crossing closer to the entrance to the school and an Adult Crossing Guard was approved. The single school crossing is currently being reviewed and may result in a change to a Pedestrian Crossover (PXO) being installed in the future. On street parking demand appears to be greater in the morning peak period outside the school than the afternoon. Hazardous behaviour by drivers in front of the school (parking in school bus loading zone, U-turns, 3 point turns and double parking) warrants police enforcement.

These sample maps from Mary Shadd Public School are provided courtesy of the City of Toronto's Transportation Services, District 4, Works & Emergency Services.

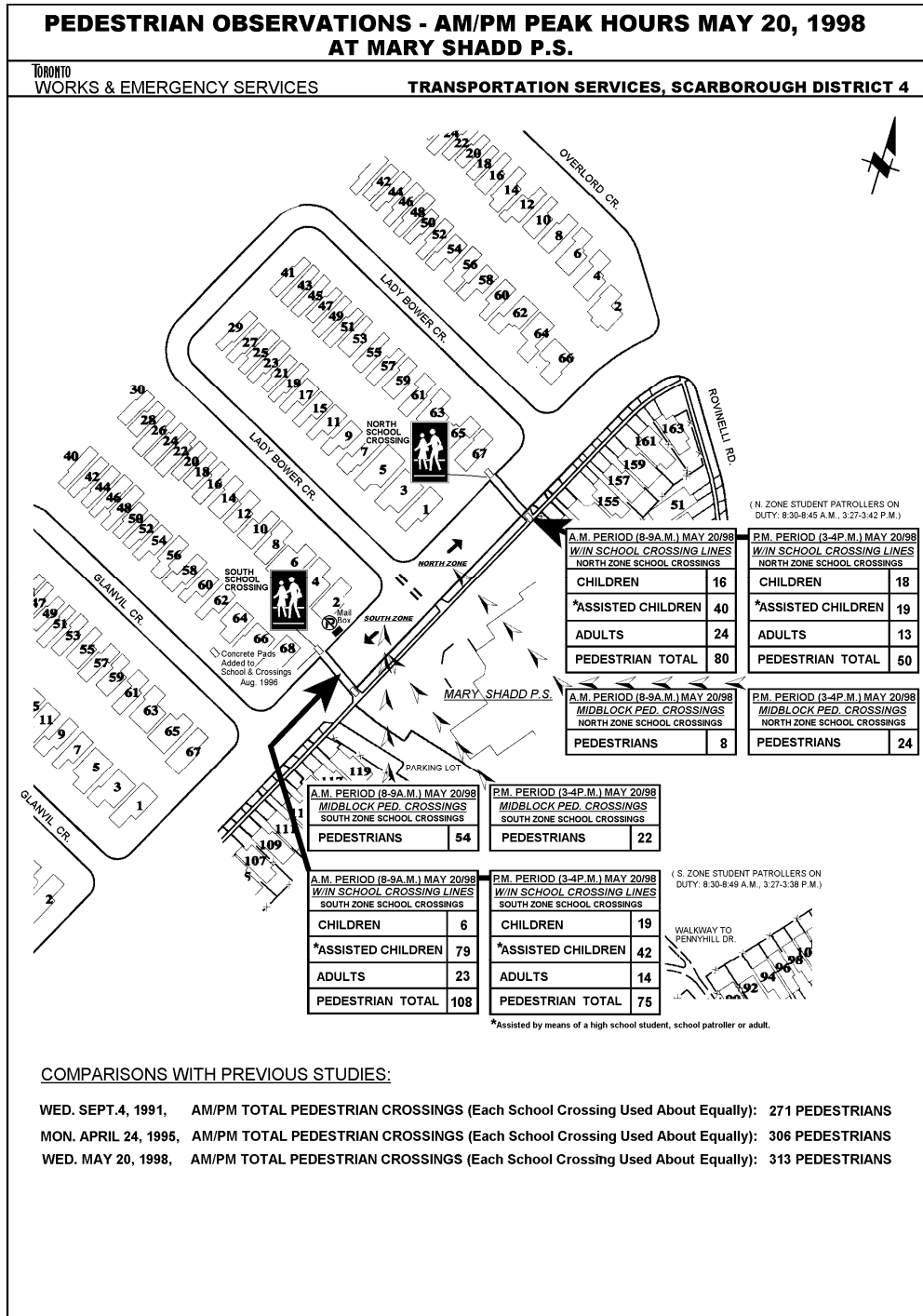
Toronto's Transportation Services advises schools that when parking demand exceeds the parking supply, potentially dangerous traffic congestion can result. They recommend that facilities generating parking activity try and keep the traffic on its own site. Risks associated with traffic congestion can be lessened if more people walk to/from school.

PARKING REGULATIONS ON HUPFIELD TRAIL, MARY SHADD PUBLIC SCHOOL

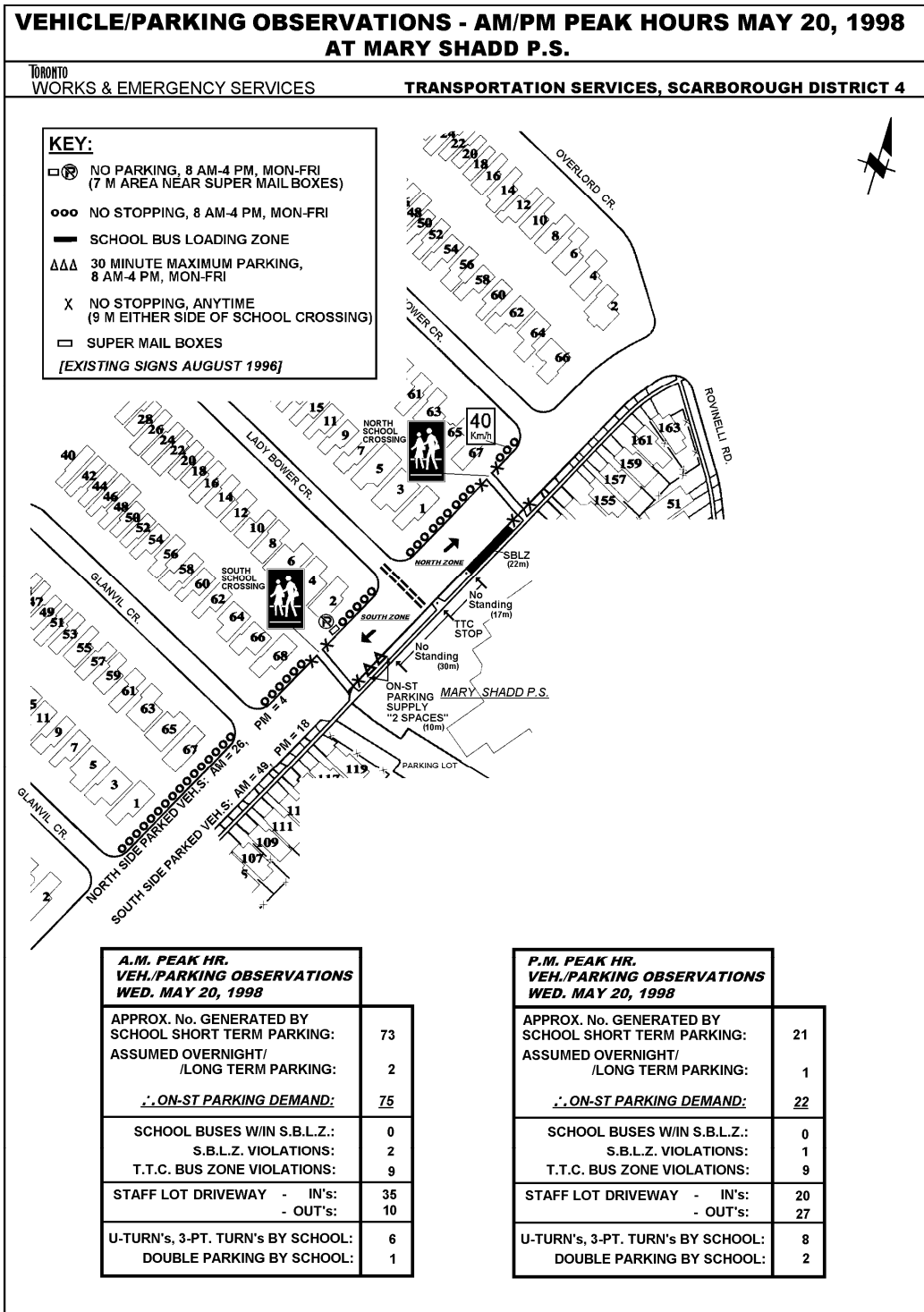


h:\u00d88 886\hupext2.tif, jan24/2000  
D99 302

PEDESTRIAN OBSERVATIONS, AM/PM PEAK HOURS, MARY SHADD PUBLIC SCHOOL



VEHICLE/PARKING OBSERVATIONS, AM/PM PEAK HOURS, MARY SHADD PUBLIC SCHOOL



h:\\_jabscan\ppp\hupex4.tif sept30/98 098 086