School Zones: working with the community towards achieving safer, smarter parking.

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INTRODUCTION
In response to observed high levels of unsafe parking practice, Waverley Council endorsed a program of community education to raise public awareness of the dangers associated with illegal parking in school zones. The communication strategy aimed to increase voluntary compliance with legal parking in school zones through improved knowledge and understanding of the dangers created by non-compliance. It also sought to involve local primary-school students by inviting them to create a school zone road safety mascot which would come to life in their own community and be the “face” of future educational resources.

METHODS
The communication strategy had three main components:

1. The mascot design competition which was developed with input from the Department of Education and Training (DET) to complement classroom learning around key messages being taught through the mandated Road Safety Strand of the K-6 Personal Development, Health & Physical Education (PDH&PE) syllabus. Teachers were able to use the competition as an assessment tool for associated learning outcomes. Entries were judged on their creativity and relevance to key road safety messages and the winning mascot design, Bee Safe Buzzy Bee, was launched in September 2008. Bee Safe Buzzy Bee has become a popular local persona and has made many appearances at school assemblies, community events and the Sydney Children’s Hospital, Randwick.

2. An education campaign targeting the parents of primary school-aged children was rolled out across the municipality. The resources focussed on identified gaps in drivers’ knowledge which were deemed to be a major impediment to compliance with parking signage. They explained the rationale behind parking restrictions and dispelled the misguided but popular concept of “safe illegal parking”. They also addressed public confusion over “gazetted school days” - of particular relevance in a Local Government Area where private schools outnumber public schools. Parents were urged to capitalise on the context and energy of the mascot design competition by modelling safe parking behaviour and exploring key road safety messages with their children at home. Since the launch of the mascot, a small Bee Safe Buzzy Bee logo has appeared in all parent publications, thereby making a strategic cognitive link with the popular school zone mascot.

3. An announcement by Council that for a period of 12 months it would donate the net income from parking infringements issued in school zones to the Children’s Hospital Foundation at Randwick. This aimed to counter the pervasive negative community misperception that parking infringements are issued to raise revenue and are not safety-related.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The major goal of the communication message was to increase voluntary compliance with legal parking in school zones. Since the campaign’s launch, there has been a reduction in the number of infringements issued in patrolled school zones. Pleasing as this result has been, it reveals little about how well drivers are self-enforcing in un-patrolled school zones. To assess voluntary changed behaviour, follow-up on-site observations have been undertaken and these reflect a general improvement in voluntary compliance with restricted parking in unpatrolled school zones. This is a positive indicator that the campaign messages are being understood and bringing about a change in behaviour. Community feedback also reports improved awareness of the link between parking and pedestrian safety issues.

Feedback from schools is that enforcement visits by Parking Patrol Officers are still welcomed as an important component of the overall strategy to achieve the goal of increased compliance with legal parking. In response, Council has continued to visit two school zones on each school day. Intelligence gathered from officers will continue to inform the direction of future educational material by responding to identified school-specific problems. This will maximize the relevance and cost-efficiency of future educational resources provided to individual schools.

A second goal was to involve the local children in the campaign through the mascot design competition. The high level of participation was enormously encouraging and indicated a high level of interest and support from school communities. Those few schools that did not enter the formal competition process due to the constraints of a burdened curriculum, willingly distributed educational material. The children’s involvement in the mascot design has brought about local ownership of the topic and identification with the mascot prompts recall of important road safety messages.

The valuable contribution of the Department of Education’s Regional Road safety Consultant added integrity to the educational rationale behind the competition. A strength of the campaign is its flexibility and inherent sustainability with the creation of a mascot which will continue to visit schools and community events and has the capacity to evolve with changes in pedagogical and legislative amendments. The campaign’s outcome is testament to the benefits of the project’s collaborative inter-agency approach.
CONCLUSIONS
There is clearly widespread community ignorance of the connection between legal parking and road safety. This lack of understanding prevents drivers from accepting that many parking restrictions in school zones are there to protect vulnerable road-users and not to raise revenue as is so often claimed. A broad, public education campaign focussing on this issue could bring about changed behaviour and lead to safer school zones.

The groundbreaking decision to donate school zone infringement income to the hospital has been pivotal in communicating to residents that Council is serious about school zone safety and has highlighted the critical missing link between legal parking and child safety.