



Local News

TwinCATS reaching out to community

Agency creates Facebook page and looks at changing meeting times, scheduling more special events to get public more involved

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BENTON HARBOR - Twin Cities Area Transportation Study Committee (TwinCATS) members are looking to boost public participation with different meeting times, increased use of social networking sites and scheduling special events.

Members of the TwinCATS Technical Advisory and Policy committees approved a draft plan last week, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission associate planner Anna Rahtz said.

"We'll continue discussing it at future meetings - we talked about several different things, such as the use of different meeting times and locations, so that more people can attend," Rahtz said. "Members seemed to think it was a good idea, especially with some of these big road projects that come up."

TwinCATS has also entered the social networking arena, through its own Facebook page, and will look at ways to communicate more directly with the public, such as making the website more interactive, according to Rahtz.

"Basically, we talked about how the plan is a working document - we have some things in there are that general, and others that are more specific," she said.

TwinCATS meets at 9:30 a.m. on the third Monday of the month at Southwest Michigan Regional Airport in Benton Harbor. The Technical Advisory Committee meets first, with Policy Committee meetings following at 10:30 a.m.

Berrien County Commissioners hold several night meetings every year, as part of its drive to boost public attendance. Asked if TwinCATS will do likewise, Rahtz said, "We're still talking about that - we're looking at several different ways of getting our information out, such as through the 'MailMax' (publication)."

A copy of the 73-page draft is available by clicking the relevant link at the commission's website, <http://swmpc.org/>.

TwinCATS members also heard about the Walk & Roll project, which is aimed at developing a countywide bicycle and pedestrian-friendly network. Abonmarche Consulting CEO Chris Cook is chairman of the Walk & Roll subcommittee, which is working with planning commission staff on the project. The group formed last September.

As part of those efforts, the subcommittee is finalizing maps of existing non-motorized trails, which will be incorporated into long-term planning for the project.

The next step is making the case for the project in TwinCATS' coverage area, Rahtz said.

That area includes the cities of Benton Harbor, Bridgman, and St. Joseph; Benton, Lake, Lincoln, Royalton, Sodus and St. Joseph townships; and the villages of Shoreham and Stevensville. Grand Beach and Michiana are satellite members.

With gas price fluctuations promoting greater interest in non-motorized transport, there's never been a better time to present projects like Walk & Roll, Rahtz said.

"We're going to go around to each municipality, and explain what they'd get out of the project," Rahtz said. "That'll happen over the next six months. Then, we'll schedule one to two more public meetings, and get some input about what the final project should be like."

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