

# Board of Health calls for a safer Napier Avenue

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, April 7, 2016 6:00 am

BENTON TOWNSHIP — The Berrien County Board of Health and health department staff members say that making Napier Avenue safer for people on foot or on bikes could be a matter of life or death.

The board on Wednesday endorsed a letter to the Twin Cities Area Transportation Study Policy Committee asking that safety features for walkers and cyclists be added to plans for resurfacing Napier Avenue from the St. Joseph River to M-139.

“We cannot put another generation in danger because of the bad infrastructure design of Napier Avenue,” a report from Be Healthy Berrien, which includes the health department, states. “People who rely on walking and biking to live, work, worship, attend school and travel along Napier Avenue suffer an undue burden of an increased risk of accidents and injuries. Between 2000 and 2009, 11 pedestrians and bicycle crashes occurred on Napier Avenue, resulting in eight injuries and two fatalities.”

The TwinCATS committee has included resurfacing Napier Avenue in its list of 11 projects to be submitted to the Federal Highway Administration and the Michigan Department of Transportation. Work is slated for 2019 and 2020 for road improvements on the avenue that runs through St. Joseph and Benton townships.

The Board of Health asks that a corridor study be completed before the design phase for Napier Avenue is done.

The TwinCATS committee is set to vote on the transportation plan May 16, and the public comment period ends April 22.

The Be Healthy Berrien report said that this busy section of Napier has the fifth-highest number of crashes of any road in the TwinCATS area, and is only six crashes behind the riskiest roadway, M-63.

Napier sees a lot of pedestrian traffic, as shown by the worn-down foot paths in the grass.

“The lack of sidewalks and crosswalks, lack of bicycle paths, poor lighting and high-speed traffic puts undue burdens on those who rely on walking or biking for transportation,” the report said.

Many of the area’s residents have no choice but to walk or bike to stores, schools and churches, with as many as 30 percent of households without a vehicle.

Nicki Britten, the health department’s deputy health officer, said that sidewalks, crosswalks and bike lanes do more for residents’ health than protect them from vehicles.

“We know that walking and cycling are good ways to build physical activity,” Britten told the board. But people need safe spaces to do these activities, she said.

The Be Healthy Berrien report notes that 59 percent of the county’s adults said they walk regularly for exercise. “However, lack of safe places to walk is a major barrier to those seeking to improve their health with physical activity through walking.”

That exercise is needed. In 2011, 40 percent of Berrien County adults were found to be obese, and another 31 percent were overweight.

Britten said people in neighborhoods with safe streets socialize more and are more connected to their communities.

Making the roadway safer could even boost the local economy. The health department’s letter to TwinCATS says that conversations with residents show that they would walk to nearby businesses if the way were safer.

One bump is that the Berrien County Road Commission would be responsible for Napier Avenue, while the townships would be responsible for maintaining the sidewalks.

Berrien County Commissioner Bill Chickering, liaison to the Board of Health, said St. Joseph Township officials are in favor of taking steps to make their section of Napier safer, and have set aside funding to accomplish this.

Chickering said this is “a very complicated issue.”

The Board of Health concedes that there is no simple solution, but it asks TwinCATS and the townships to adhere to their own Complete Streets pedestrian improvement guidelines, adopted in 2014.

“Failure to include Complete Streets design elements in the proposed Napier Avenue project would ensure that at least another generation will not have access to safe non-motorized transportation accommodations,” the health department letter warns.

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