



Local News

Happy trails for Benton Harbor?

Berrien County health official lays out scheme for walking path

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BENTON HARBOR - Right now it's just a pipe dream along Pipestone Street, but Berrien County health official Theresa Green has a vision of a walking trail through woods and along waterways that could link neighborhoods to Benton Harbor's downtown.

Green, the director of community health planning for the Berrien County Health Department, last week presented to board members drawings of what she hopes will become a 1.5-mile walking path along a former CSX railroad bed that runs through a wooded area from Fair Avenue to Main Street.

The property runs directly behind the health department's office on Pipestone. Health officials, who have a verdant view of the land, have thought about such an amenity for years and decided recently to resurrect the idea.

It's all in the "very early stages," Green noted. The drawings were prepared by the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and were paid for through a grant from the Greenways Project.

The next step will be to talk with county and city officials to determine if the project is feasible and if the other entities want to get on board. Issues of ownership, maintenance and safety along the trail would have to be worked out.

Green speculated that the county would have short-term ownership of the property, if acquired, but that ultimately Benton Harbor should have ownership.

"It needs to be in the hands of Benton Harbor," said Green, who has been in contact with county officials but hasn't spoken with Benton Harbor leaders yet.

The first goal for Green and her colleagues, of course, is to find ways to improve the health of county residents.

"We strongly believe that fighting obesity is way more than programs to teach people how to eat better," Green said.

The solution also has to be environmental, giving residents "an easy way to walk, an easy way to exercise, an easy way to get to healthy food," such as that being sold at the downtown farmers market.

Green called the proposed trail "the perfect conduit" to make this happen, while acknowledging that "it's just a pipe dream right now."

Getting the drawings was the first step.

She added that the city's community development department rated the sidewalks that would connect to the trail as "fairly good."

County health officials have heard complaints that the development of Harbor Shores will cut Benton Harbor residents off from that part of the city, Green added.

She sees this trail as a way to link residents to Harbor Shores, which is developing its own system of trails near the lakeshore.

Walking trails also have been constructed downtown and in the city's Arts District.

"We hope that these little projects will join together," Green said.

Green has been in contact with CSX officials to determine how much the property, which makes up 14.5 acres, would cost.

The CSX official she spoke to was "very reluctant to put a ballpark figure" on its value, explaining that it would depend on the value of surrounding properties.

CSX won't be asked to undertake an appraisal unless county and city officials give the green light.

Green has identified three possible grants that could be sought to pay for the railroad property.

When they saw the maps Wednesday, Green said the board of health members were "thrilled" and support pursuing the project.

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