

Public input sought for plan

■ Local funding issues may hinder transportation progress.

By **DOUGLAS FARMER**

Tribune Staff Writer

Residents of Cass and Berrien counties have an opportunity to voice their opinions on how nearly \$14.5 million in transportation projects will be spent between 2011 and 2014.

The four-year Transportation Improvement Program is accepting comments on its proposals for those years. The plans add up to 37 proposals at a cost of \$14,414,559, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission transportation planner Anna Rahlz said.

"A large part of the transportation planning process is having the public involved in the discovery step of the process to ensure the transportation plan is contributing to the desires and needs of the community," Rahlz said.

A four-year plan is issued every three years, and in this version, the biggest changes come in miles of rural roads due to be resurfaced. In 2011, Bertrand Road is scheduled to be resurfaced from Weaver Road to Mayflower Road and a hot mix asphalt overlay will be applied to Bertrand from the Berrien County line to Ironwood Road. In 2012, Bertrand will be resurfaced from Mayflower Road to Red Bud Trail.

Funding for improvements such as these comes from the Federal Surface Transportation Program from the Federal Highway Administration, Rahlz said, but a portion of the funds must be matched locally.

"There is a 20 percent local match that goes in for road projects," she said. "That has been kind of an issue. We don't have enough local match to do all the projects that were planned to be done."

Facing more difficulties are projects based on state funding. Constituting more than half of the total amount, a \$7.8 million resurfacing of eight miles of U.S. 12 from Michigan-60 to Edwardsburg is included in the plan for 2013, but some state plans did not make the final proposals.

The Michigan Department of Transportation "has had a lot of funding issues," Rahlz said, adding that if federal money is not granted, a statewide gas tax may be necessary.

Other improvements included in the proposals deal with public transportation. On-bus camera systems are scheduled to be installed in some locales in 2011, and a new bus will be cycled into the Niles Dial-A-Ride system in both 2013 and 2014.

But one Cass County resident has already expressed concern not enough is being done for public transportation in that county.

"One (comment) from Cass County was concerned about not having enough of the needs for bus transit addressed for Cass County residents," Rahlz said. "We are looking into that."

Public comments are not simply a process in this case, but instead have provoked action by the commission.

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Input

"We don't currently have a bus transit agent from Cass County government on our committee," Rahlz said. "We are looking into that and getting them involved now."

Such actions spurred by public comment appear to help the commission reach its purpose.

"The main goal with this is to preserve the infrastructure that we have through the road projects as well as providing the best transit as is needed," Rahlz said.

The plan is open to public comment through June 22, and comments can be provided in person at the regular Niles-Buchanan-Cass Area Transportation Study meeting at 1:30 p.m. June 22 at the Niles City Council Chambers. Comments also can be submitted by e-mail, phone or fax to Anna Rahlz at rahltza@swmpc.org, (269) 925-1137 or (269) 925-0288, respectively.

The proposals can be seen at swmpc.org/2014tip-projectsn.asp.

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