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TOP STORY

Napier pedestrian plan under review

Residents provide input at open house

By TONY WITTKOWSKI - HP Staff Writer Mar 27, 2018 Updated Mar 27, 2018



St. Joseph resident Nathan Harrmann looks to apply a green sticker on one of several survey boards Monday at the Overflow Church in Benton Township. Harrmann was one of several residents who provided input regarding Napier Avenue, a busy street that lacks pedestrian walkways.

Tony Wittkowski / HP staff

BENTON TOWNSHIP — In a packed room at the Overflow Church, more than two dozen people came together Monday to discuss a Benton Township street that's been a problem for years.

AECOM, an engineering firm hired to gauge residential preferences regarding sidewalks along Napier Avenue, held a public open house at the Benton Township church to discuss the Napier Avenue Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan.

Jeromie Winsor, an AECOM senior planner, led a presentation about Napier and provided statistics on the troubled roadway.

From 2010 to 2016, there were 843 vehicle-to-vehicle crashes and 14 vehicle-to-pedestrian/bicyclist crashes. Talk of constructing sidewalks along Napier Avenue has been ongoing for years. The main obstacles standing in the way of such a project have been funding and right-of-way feasibility.

Winsor told the crowd of area residents that the crosswalks are difficult to find and the road itself is too wide for many pedestrians to cross in a timely manner.

“The crosswalks are spaced far apart,” Winsor said. “Safety is the key here. There is a high population of seniors and children that live around Napier. For some, owning or driving a vehicle is not always an option.”

Among the attendees to speak up at the open house was Nathan Harrmann.

The St. Joseph resident works in Benton Harbor and often uses Napier Avenue throughout the week. Harrmann said if a major project proves to be too costly, the roadway could still add signs for drivers.

“One thing I’m not seeing is a zebra crosswalk,” he said. “Education and signage could go a long way in limiting the amount of accidents Napier gets.”

Napier Avenue, with its lack of sidewalks and high traffic count – which ranges from 11,000 to as high as 18,000 cars a day – has made news over the years for the amount of car-pedestrian accidents.

The four-lane roadway’s most recent fatality occurred in January, when a 21-year-old St. Joseph man was struck and killed by a car.

Ryan Fellows, associate planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said they plan to take all the comments from residents at Monday’s open house and condense the popular choices into viable options for discussion at its next two meetings.

“We’re looking at everything, including how much of a buffer do people feel safe with between the sidewalk and the street,” Fellows said. “I’ve been hearing a lot of people ask about the right-of-ways and whether they are wide enough to allow sidewalks.”

Several interactive stations were spread around the room to allow attendees to jot down notes and place stickers on printed maps of the Napier corridor. The stickers differed in colors from green to red to represent how comfortable residents felt about various bike lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks.

While there is no set timeline for adding such amenities, Fellows said the best scenario for this project would be in 2019, when Napier Avenue undergoes a massive repaving project. By adding pedestrian walkways to the corridor at the same time as the project, Fellows said the townships could theoretically save money and time.

“The only caveat is we need to figure out what our project would entail because we’re running out of time for applying for grants by 2019,” Fellows said. “These road projects are scheduled well in advance.”

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is working with Benton and St. Joseph townships, the Berrien County Road Department, and consultants from AECOM and Williams & Works to create the Napier Avenue Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan.

The study will consider the stretch of Napier Avenue from the St. Joseph River, on the west end, to the I-94 interchange on the east end of the street. The physical roadway, public rights-of-way and adjacent properties will also be considered in the plan. Napier Avenue was given a “walking audit” in December by a steering committee that is made up of business owners, residents and township officials.

A second public open house meeting will be held from 4-7 p.m. May 21 in the Napier Parkview Baptist Church at 245 W. Napier Ave.

Information on the project can be found at www.napieravenue.org. Residents who were unable to attend the open house can still provide input by using the digital survey and an interactive mapping exercise available online.

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