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TOP STORY

Napier sidewalks get fresh look

Napier plan under review, but funding, easement concerns persist

By TONY WITTKOWSKI - HP Staff Writer Jan 23, 2018 Updated Jan 23, 2018



Cars drive along Napier Avenue on Monday in Benton Township. The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and other government entities are reviewing ways to get sidewalks built along the busy road, where a pedestrian was killed last Friday evening.

Tony Wittkowski / HP staff

ST. JOSEPH — The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and several municipalities are focusing on the lack of sidewalks along the Napier corridor in Benton and St. Joseph townships.

Napier, which has four lanes and a 40-mph speed limit, is getting more attention following the death of a 21-year-old St. Joseph man who was struck and killed by a car along the busy road on Friday night.

Brian Elftmann was walking westbound along Napier when he was hit by a car heading the same direction.

The portion of Napier Avenue that stretches from the St. Joseph River to the I-94 bypass was given a “walking audit” in December by a steering committee that is made up of business owners, residents and township officials.

Known as the Napier Corridor Pedestrian and Bicycle Feasibility and Conceptual Engineering Plan, the steering committee is in the process of considering pedestrian, bicycling and transit facility improvements along Napier.

Ryan Fellows, an associate planner at Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said the plan will assess options and the associated costs.

“Having a plan with feasible options for non-motorized transportation and knowledge of the costs of these options is a prerequisite for investing funds in future pedestrian, bicycling and transit improvements,” Fellows said.

The Twin Cities Area Transportation Study committee approved a resolution for a planning funds grant in April 2016, which led to the start of the steering committee.

TwinCATs and township officials have received several requests in the past, asking for better bike and pedestrian safety on Napier because it’s such a well-traveled road.

However, TwinCATs officials have said it’s the townships that would have to find money for sidewalks and non-motorized paths.

Looking for funding

St. Joseph Township Manager Denise Cook gave her condolences to the family and friends of Elftmann, saying it’s another reminder of why it’s important to work together for a solution on walkway issues.

Cook said the township is working with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, the Berrien County Road Department, Benton Township and the Michigan Department of Transportation on the steering committee. The committee also includes business owners, residents along Napier, and city representatives

from Benton Harbor and St. Joseph.

AECOM, a consulting firm, was hired in October 2017 to complete three different plans for sidewalks along Napier.

“The issue is, how does it get paid for? Easements come into question,” Cook said. “Hopefully there’s some grant money available. Even then it will be expensive. There may be federal and state funding, but we do not know where that would come from.”

Benton Township Superintendent Kelli Nelson said she and Treasurer Debbie Boothby took part in the “walking audit,” which required everyone to rate a portion of Napier’s sidewalks and crosswalks.

While there are paths that have been grooved into the grass along the road, Nelson said she understands they can be hard to walk on when the snow piles up.

“We’re moving through the process of looking at what the options are,” Nelson said. “If there is a way to get non-motorized pathways in there, we’ll do what we can.”

The feasibility of sidewalks along the corridor has been debated for years.

Nelson alluded to a significant number of utility lines along that corridor and how small the road’s right of way is – which makes it nearly impossible to install sidewalks without obtaining easements from residents.

One of the bigger impediments is the cost of maintenance.

“We run a pretty tight budget and sidewalk maintenance hasn’t been factored in,” Nelson said. “We don’t own any sidewalks. Once we start putting them in, we want to have a maintenance program. It’s something we’ve considered, just not something we have not taken action on yet.”

Looking ahead

Fellows said they have three steering committee meetings planned, which take place about every other month in February, April and July.

He said there will be public hearings in the months that meetings are not held to collect input. However, no dates have been scheduled.

“Once we have a date set for our March meeting, the plan is to find a spot along the (Napier) corridor to hold our meeting, and give the public a chance to review the feasibility of the sidewalks with us,” Fellows said.

He said the study will cover what funding mechanisms can be used. However, Fellows was unsure when the three proposals would be presented to the steering committee this year.

Once a recommendation is available, Nelson said they plan to work with residents to see what is feasible.

Cook said the steering committee is hoping to have sidewalks installed in 2019, to coincide with road work that’s being done along Napier, by Berrien County.

“The initial idea was to have this work done all at the same time. That way it is less expensive,” she said. “But it’s all about timing and funding.”

Elftmann now has a Go Fund Me page that was created for funeral costs. Those who wish to donate can visit it at www.gofundme.com/brian-joseph-elftmann-cristobal.

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