

## [Traveling off the beaten path](#)

By **JESSICA SIEFF**

**Niles Daily Star**

For many commuters and even residents in Michiana, US-12 is just another stretch of road to get motorists from place to place.

But now, that seemingly insignificant stretch of highway is getting some rather significant national attention thanks to an effort by many across the state including the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission's Kim Gallagher, to support a growing number of eco-conscious motorists and promote the cities and towns like Niles that sit just off the banks of US-12.

Recently, a TIME magazine article highlighted the efforts of Gallagher, the state's Department of Transportation and individual supporters to somewhat reinvent US-12 – into an eco-conscious means of travel.

TIME called it a means of “turning blue highways green.”

The premise is simple enough: looking at options to encourage a slower pace of travel, making a drive down US-12 in an electric car more comfortable by allowing for charging stations and giving all motorists the chance and the option to slow down and see the small towns just off the highway.

As the market grew for electric cars and the eco-conscious movement has been gaining more ground, “we thought what about a testing ground for the electric car industry?” Gallagher said.

The benefits would not be limited just to those owners of electric vehicles who could take advantage of charging stations, whether installed off the highway or at the small towns just off the road, but also to those small towns themselves.

As motorists would stop to charge, Gallagher said, that would give them a few hours to visit a city like Niles, take in the shops, restaurants and attractions.

Encouraging tourism and commerce.

The idea is preliminary and Gallagher said that many of the cities and towns that would be affected might not even be aware of the idea – if they haven't already heard about the national article.

Soon after the TIME article ran, it was picked up by websites and blogs like Harvard's Innovations, Earth Blips and the Erie Hiker.

“I think every town should be thinking about electric plug-ins,” Gallagher said. She’s not alone. Oct. 19-21, Detroit will host “the first plug-in electric vehicle conference,” called “The Business of Plugging In.”

Though there may be many more conversations to be had, the initial response is a positive one when it comes to using US-12 as a “testing ground” for motorists to slow down, charge up and stop by a small town or two to see what the state has to offer. “It would be wonderful,” said Niles Main Street’s Executive Director Lisa Croteau. “What you get off the highway, it’s just a little slower pace of life.”

Anything to encourage motorists, tourists, or just passersby to take some time to discover the towns just off US-12, she added, would be a positive.

The highway boasts a strong history of connecting the cities of Detroit and Chicago and there are 17 other heritage routes the state that could benefit from a similar move to turn green.

Or, at least, greener.

The TIME magazine article is available online at [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).