

Transportation projects focus of local survey

By JESSICA SIEFF

Niles Daily Star

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, Niles-Cass-Buchanan Area Transportation Study (NATS) and Niles officials are encouraging residents to submit their ideas regarding area transportation projects.

A NATS Transportation Importance Survey is now available to find out what projects residents would like to see done in various areas of transportation including roads, sidewalks, bike lanes, bus transit, aviation, trails and waterways.

“It’s one of the tools that we use to prioritize projects,” Niles’ Public Works Director Neil Coulston said Wednesday.

The survey is intended for residents of Niles and Niles Township, Buchanan and Buchanan Township, Edwardsburg, Ontwa Township, Bertrand Township, Howard Township and Milton Township.

When it comes to projects that receive some federal funding, Coulston said, in Niles, a committee will meet to score suggestions or requests. The survey would provide more information about which improvements residents feel need to be done.

“One of the problems we’re experiencing now,” Coulston said, is many projects that receive some amount of federal funding often require a percentage of match funds – something that isn’t always possible.

“We don’t have the local match,” he said.

Officials often benefit from fuel tax revenues, “those revenues are way down,” Coulston said.

“Everybody’s in a pinch,” he added.

The survey is free and must be completed by Feb. 1. It is being made available in hard copy format in various locations and online. To access the online version, visit www.swmpc.org/transporturvey.asp.

Though funding for projects is something that Coulston admitted is a challenge now, the purpose of the survey is to plan for the future.

“We’re looking into the future,” he said. “And things are going to get better for us. It’s going to take time.

“This information is what we use,” Coulston said, to determine which projects to focus on. Coulston along with Joe Ray, also of the Public Works Department and Community Development Director Juan Ganum serve on NATS’ Technical Advisory Committee.

Councilwoman Georgia Boggs serves on the organization’s policy committee. For more information, visit www.swmpc.org.