



Local News

'Walk & Roll' gets support

People would like area to be friendlier to pedestrians, bicyclists

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BENTON HARBOR - Making Berrien County friendlier for bicycles and pedestrians is a big deal if responses to a countywide survey are an indication,

That was the chief concern emerging from four public forums devoted to the issue, according to associate planners Anna Rahtz and Trevor Thomas of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

All told, the commission received 57 surveys from forums held mid-May in Benton Harbor, Bridgman, St. Joseph and Stevensville, Thomas said.

"One thing that really came up was the number of people who said that they value being able to go on longer on recreational bike rides - and the extent to which they find themselves not being able to do that in St. Joe or Benton Harbor - or find themselves going elsewhere," he said.

Residents who filled out the surveys were asked to identify where they lived, which they considered least pedestrian- or bicycle-friendly and what types of improvements might address those concerns.

"That's something we heard from a number of people. They want to be able to stay in St. Joseph-Benton Harbor, or spend money, but they don't feel comfortable getting into or out of the cities themselves," Thomas said.

Rahtz and Thomas reviewed the survey results with the Twin Cities Area Transportation Study, which is a committee that works with the commission to help shape transit policy. In September 2009, TwinCATS formed the Non-Motorized Transportation Subcommittee, or "Walk & Roll" group, to find ways of making Berrien County more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly.

Roads and streets cited in the surveys as bicycle- or pedestrian-unfriendly included Cleveland, Napier, Niles and Washington avenues; Glenlord, Hilltop, John Beers and Marquette Woods roads; and Red Arrow Highway.

None of those nominations is particularly surprising, though each area has unique problems, which local governments must consider as they try to address those problems, Rahtz said.

"At the Lincoln Township (forum) meeting, there was a lot of concern about the area around the new Meijer (store). The sidewalks don't connect to the other existing sidewalks, so it's hard for people to walk under (the) I-94 (overpass), which is really dangerous," she said.

For all the information collected, Thomas said he wanted more comments from Benton Harbor and Benton Township - which tend to have a higher percentage of households without cars, he said.

However, many problems can be identified through bicycle-pedestrian maps and statistics, or just basic observation, Thomas said.

"There's a lot of roads where you can see people walking in the street, like Hilltop Road, or Napier," Thomas said. "There's a lot of places where you see people in wheelchairs. You see this quite a bit in Benton Township."

Other examples include "go paths" - or signs of grass that wheelchair users have worn down near major roads, Thomas said.

"That's a very telltale sign that there ought to be a sidewalk there," he said.

The next step is putting together a non-motorized transportation plan for TwinCATS to adopt by early fall, Thomas said. That document could then be included in a long-range plan.

"Obviously, that's not the same as having better facilities, but the ideal is for it to be an ongoing process that starts immediately," he said.

Local governments could then use the information to identify projects to ease some of the problems cited in the surveys, Thomas said.

"We've had a lot of buy-in. A lot of people do recognize the importance of having better (non-motorized) facilities, for health reasons, safety reasons, access reasons," Thomas said.

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