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Local News

Where the sidewalks end

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Don Campbell / H-P staff A "goat path" created by foot traffic, is pictured along the south side of Napier Avenue between Colfax and Broadway Avenues. When it comes to a lack of sidewalks, one big problem area is Napier Avenue, from the St. Joseph River in St. Joseph Township east to Pipestone Road in Benton Township. Tim Fenderbosch, St. Joseph Township manager, is well aware of the problem, but he says getting the funding to build the sidewalks is "definitely an issue."

A handful of local community thoroughfares can be dangerous for pedestrians. Officials recognize the problems, but property issues, costs keep new pavement at bay.

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When there's a dangerous pedestrian situation, sidewalks are the answer.

At Monday's Royalton Township Board meeting, a Hidden Acres subdivision resident talked to board members about some problems she's been having picking up her children at E.P. Clarke Elementary School on Glenlord Road.

Michelle Humes said she takes her kids to school in the morning but prefers to let them walk home to get some fresh air and exercise. She picks them up in bad weather, but that's become difficult because there are now "no parking" signs along Hart Drive, which runs off Glenlord by the school.

Humes also said part of Hart Drive is potentially hazardous for students who are walking. "Any chance we might get sidewalks?" she asked, half jokingly, half hopefully.

"Yes," Trustee Robert Basselman told her. Just get all the property owners in the area to agree.

You bet your life

Southwest Michigan residents who walk or jog on roads without sidewalks are betting their lives that the drivers going past them are paying attention and are not distracted by a cell phone call, a crying child in the back seat or a bee that's gotten into the car. Pedestrians must stay alert, ready at an instant's notice to dive for the ditch.

Sidewalks are the answer. Some Royalton Township residents have been asking for sidewalks or at least extended shoulders on Miners Road, though nothing's come of that as yet.

But few property owners want to pay for sidewalks, and a lot of property owners don't want the responsibility and liability that go along with them.

At the Nov. 8 Lincoln Township Board meeting, there was an air of accomplishment among officials when they talked about an upcoming sidewalk project along busy John Beers Road.

The \$220,000 project next year will connect Roosevelt Road and its walking path with sidewalks at the John Beers-Cleveland Avenue intersection. That will give students and other pedestrians a safer way to walk from Lakeshore High School and Lakeshore Middle School to the municipal complex and the public library.

Township Supervisor Dick Stauffer said he hopes eventually to have John Beers sidewalks all the way to Stevensville, which has sidewalks of its own. The township already has sidewalks that run from the Cleveland-John Beers intersection two miles north to Glenlord Road.

Everyone should be pleased, right?

Not quite.

Some homeowners are still unhappy about the sidewalks, and some think the situation was safer before the sidewalks were built.

"People of Lincoln were promised that the township would maintain the sidewalks when this issue came up during the planning stages," said William Konar, 4749 S. Cedar Trail. "We were obviously misled."

Konar in an email said the walks are so close to the road that heavy snow gets piled up on them. The compacted snow "is not removed for days, making sidewalks impossible to use," he said.

When that happens, pedestrians have to walk in the road, Konar said.

"Before, there was a bike lane that was as clear as the road," Konar said. "Now pedestrians must walk in the driving lane. How can this be safer?"

Stauffer thinks otherwise

Stauffer said he hasn't gotten any sidewalk complaints.

"I get applauded," Stauffer said. "We clear the Cleveland sidewalks with our own equipment. People seem to like our sidewalks on Cleveland."

Stauffer said he sees regular pedestrian traffic on the Cleveland sidewalks, and all too many people walking along John Beers Road where there are no sidewalks.

"I see people walking down John Beers with an earbud in their ears, listening to the radio," Stauffer said. "You know they're out there exercising or walking down to Martin's."

It's essential to keep pedestrians and traffic separated as much as possible, Stauffer said. In fact, he added, it's so important that the township since 1990 has had an ordinance requiring developers to build sidewalks in new developments.

Stauffer said the township wants eventually to extend the sidewalks along John Beers to Stevensville,

though there's no money in the budget for that right now.

"Certainly it's one of many needs for sidewalks," Stauffer said. "We need sidewalks on Marquette Woods Road, too, from Roosevelt at least to Cleveland Avenue, and even past that to Washington. There are high school kids using the roads there for track training."

Planners say it's needed and even beneficial

No one forgets the horrifying incident in February when a pickup truck with a snowplow hit two pedestrians on Red Arrow Highway in Lincoln Township, killing one of them.

Crash statistics involving pedestrians are sobering, and those in the business of planning agree that the more traffic and pedestrians can be separated, the better. It's just safer.

But sidewalks, paths and bicycle lanes do much more than improve safety, according to Southwest Michigan Planning Commission officials. Such amenities lead to better health, make it easier for older adults to get around and stay independent, help attract and keep young professionals, boost tourism and help people who by choice or necessity don't have cars. In fact, planners envision a grand network of walking and biking paths connecting many area municipalities.

Suzann Flowers, associate planner with the SMPC, said "walkability" even boosts real estate values.

"There have been plenty of studies that show the benefits to house values close to walking and biking facilities," Flowers said. Real estate agents "prominently display information" when marketing a property close to the Kal-Haven Trail, she said.

The Twin Cities Area Transportation Study has put out a draft "Walk and Roll" plan on what area residents say they want, where the major problems are, and what can be done about them.

When it comes to a lack of sidewalks, one big problem area is Napier Avenue, from the St. Joseph River in St. Joseph Township east to Pipestone Road in Benton Township.

It's a busy road with fast traffic, serving many stores and businesses, in an area with some apartment and senior housing complexes, and where a number of residents don't have ready access to cars. The TwinCATS study said it's obvious that Napier is a problem, from seeing pedestrians and even people in wheelchairs in the roadway, to the presence of walking paths worn into the grass.

Planners call them "goat paths."

"Where you see the grass gone and a foot path, that is a very good indication," Flowers said.

Napier "is becoming a real issue," said Tim Fenderbosch, St. Joseph Township manager. "It's not a good situation."

The "Walk and Roll" study states that "adding a sidewalk is the primary fix" for the problem.

That's so, Fenderbosch agreed, but getting the funding to build the sidewalks is "definitely an issue." Another major problem, especially because Napier is a "major artery," is that the plows will throw ice and snow onto the sidewalks, and the walks have to be cleared, he said.

The sidewalks "would require us to contract out, or purchase snow removal equipment, to clear the sidewalk," Fenderbosch said.

The township is well aware of the problem and is working on it, Fenderbosch said.

"We'll be sitting down and going over it in a lot of detail, and working with the Berrien County Road Commission and seeing what can be done along there, if anything," he said.

Officials and planners also agree that Hilltop Road, on the St. Joseph-St. Joseph Township border, should have sidewalks. Like Napier Avenue, it's a busy four-lane road with no room for pedestrians or bicycles, and drivers occasionally have to beware of people walking in the roadway.

The two municipalities recently had a \$448,000 federal grant in hand to build those sidewalks and had invested \$50,000 in pre-engineering costs.

The plan fell apart when some property owners "just did not fully cooperate, and we ran out of time," St. Joseph City Manager Frank Walsh said.

For now, the plan is dead, Walsh said.

"The challenge is that, when you first put a sidewalk in, it goes in at 100 percent of cost to the property owner," Walsh said. "If we couldn't put one in for free, what are the challenges when the property owners have to foot 100 percent of the bill?"

The liability conundrum

Icy and snow-covered sidewalks are an issue in themselves.

"Every winter there is a dramatic spike in fractures in Berrien County, especially of the hip and forearm, due to slips on icy sidewalks," said Kim Gallagher, senior planner with the SMPC. "The impacts are greatest on those who depend on walking - children on their way to school, transit users, parents with strollers, wheelchair users and the elderly."

Walsh said the ordinances dealing with sidewalks are local issues and are up to each municipality.

In St. Joseph, property owners are indeed responsible for the costs of sidewalks, sidewalk maintenance and snow removal, Walsh said. But the city splits replacement costs with property owners and is aware that snow removal can be a problem, especially for elderly people, he said.

"We have equipment to plow the sidewalks," Walsh said. "We have not ticketed anyone for sidewalks since I've been here, and that's 16 years. Let's just say it's a gray area. We have not and will not become the sidewalk police."

Lincoln Township's sidewalk ordinance is similar to St. Joseph's. As in St. Joseph, Stauffer said the township has equipment to keep the walks as clear as possible.

Flowers agreed that liability and responsibility are issues - "How do we ask a 85-year-old man in a wheelchair to clear his sidewalk when he has mobility issues?" - but added there are answers.

"I think that neighborhood coalitions, students, can help one another," Flowers said. "Where I live, if someone needs help because of the snow, we get out our tractor and move the snow for them. That could be a way to help one another and build community neighborhood coalitions that tackle 'on the ground' issues."

Whatever the problems, Gallagher, of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said officials need to come up with answers.

"In an area that has consistent snow covering three months out of the year, it defeats the purpose of constructing sidewalks if they can only be used three-quarters of the year," Gallagher said in an email. "... year-round walkable sidewalks are needed by all pedestrians, and deserve attention from the city, state, employees, residents, and local businesses."

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