

# Finding safer routes to school

By TONY WITTKOWSKI - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, January 1, 2016 5:00 am

BENTON TOWNSHIP - Several agencies are looking for funding to help create safer routes for children to get to school.

Cynthia LaGrow, consent agreement consultant for Benton Harbor Area Schools, said she is working with the Michigan Fitness Foundation and the Michigan Department of Transportation in order to secure a grant from the Safe Routes to School program.

Safe Routes to School is an international movement to make it safe for children to bicycle and walk to school. The program has handed out several grants to schools each year through MDOT, starting in 2008.

Arts and Communications Academy at Fair Plain School and the International Academy at Hull are two schools LaGrow is focusing on.

"Hull is in an industrial area and Fair Plain has a busy business route," LaGrow said. "Both schools have heavy traffic."

In addition to a few state agencies, LaGrow said BHAS has joined with Michigan State University's Department of Urban Planning to start the plan for improvement. This involved a preliminary audit where MSU officials took a walk around the schools to see what areas would need to be updated.

The next plan of action would be to set a public hearing to talk with students and families to see what they want. LaGrow said there is not an exact date set because MSU is facilitating the project. However, LaGrow said they do intend to hold a public meeting some time in January.

Since their efforts began in November, LaGrow spoke at Benton Township and St. Joseph Township board meetings to gauge support for the project. LaGrow said both police departments from the respective municipalities support the project.

"We've had students hit coming and going from those schools," LaGrow said. "Residents have also been hit a couple times on Napier (Avenue). Applying for a Safe Routes to School grant will be a process and is not guaranteed. We have to make sure our application is very succinct and complete. If



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Traffic moves down Napier Avenue, past the Arts and Communication Academy at Fair Plain School on Wednesday. This is one of the schools that could benefit from a grant from the Safe Routes to School program, which provides money to schools interested in making sidewalks and crosswalks for students.

we are awarded a grant, construction would likely start in late summer."

Whether it will be adding in more crosswalks, sidewalks, signs or directional signs, LaGrow said they find out what they plan to address once MSU comes back with a preliminary report.

Once the applications is sent, MDOT would review for completeness and whether the area is a priority. LaGrow said the schools' student count and number of pedestrians versus car accidents will be taken into account by MDOT. Those numbers will be compared to other schools that are applying.

Benton Township Deputy Police Chief Carl DeLand said the funding would come in handy beausse there have been a few person-versus-car accidents near Fair Plain. While Hull has not had such accidents, DeLand said the school doesn't have many sidewalks outside of the ones around the school.

"We're always supportive of our children and making sure they get to and from school safely," DeLand said. "Fair Plain can be a busy area. I haven't seen any incidents near Hull, but there aren't adjoining sidewalks by the school further down Territorial Road."

The last schools in Berrien County to be awarded a grant through the Safe Routes to School program came in 2012.

According to program's website, Sylvester Elementary and Berrien Springs Middle schools were given a \$138,500 grant to build several sidewalks and crosswalks along and across adjoining streets near the two schools.

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