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## Napier Ave. safety under the microscope

SWM Planning Commission to hold 'open house' meeting

By TONY WITTKOWSKI - HP Staff Writer Mar 20, 2018 Updated Mar 20, 2018



Cars drive along Napier Avenue on Jan. 22 in Benton Township. The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and other government entities will discuss ways to get sidewalks and bike ways built along the busy road at an open house Monday.

HP file photo / Tony Wittkowski

**BENTON TOWNSHIP** — Adding sidewalks and bike ways to improve safety along Napier Avenue will be the topic of a public open house meeting Monday.

The meeting to discuss the Napier Avenue Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan will be held from 4-7 p.m. at Overflow Community Church at 300 E. Napier Ave. in Benton Township. Presentations will be held at 4:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.

Denise Cook, St. Joseph Township manager and Napier Steering Committee member, said the corridor lacks sidewalks and crosswalks for the majority of its length.

“Napier Avenue is a major connector between St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, as well as being an important route for people to get to school, work, shopping and health services,” Cook said in a news release. “It is an unsafe situation for those traveling along Napier who do not drive. If we are able to create continuous and safe walkways and bikeways it will benefit everyone from both a safety and an economic development perspective.”

Cook said adding walkways along the busy street would make public transit options more feasible, as well.

The public open house will include interactive stations for the public to learn about the plan that was developed by the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. The existing conditions surrounding the corridor will be part of the discussion, while attendees can give input on how the corridor is used and select their top priorities for the future of the corridor.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is working with Benton and St. Joseph townships, the Berrien County Road Department, and consultants from AECOM and Williams & Works to create the Napier Avenue Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan.

The Napier Avenue corridor is an important east-west transportation route in Berrien County due to its proximity to I-94 and the M-139 commercial district.

This study will consider the stretch of Napier Avenue from the St. Joseph River on the west end to the I-94 interchange on the east end of the street. The physical roadway, public rights-of-way, and adjacent properties will also be considered in the plan.

The section of Napier Avenue has made news over the years for the amount of pedestrian hit-and-runs accidents. Napier, which has four lanes and a 40-mph speed limit, is getting more attention following the death of a 21-year-old St. Joseph man who was struck and killed by a car along the busy road in January.

Napier Avenue was given a “walking audit” in December by a steering committee that is made up of business owners, residents and township officials.

Talk of sidewalks along Napier Avenue has been ongoing for years, as the main obstacles standing in the way of such a project have been funding and right-of-way feasibility.

Benton Township Treasurer Debbie Boothby said the goal of the plan is to address the gap in the pedestrian and bike network.

“Having a plan with feasible options for non-motorized transportation and knowledge of the costs of these options is a prerequisite before we can invest in future pedestrian and bicycling improvements,” Boothby said.

Information on the project can be found at [www.napieravenue.org](http://www.napieravenue.org). Members of the public are encouraged to give their input using the digital survey and interactive mapping exercise available from the page under the link titled “Give us your input!”

Refreshments and a Spanish interpreter will be available at Monday’s meeting.

A second public open house meeting will be held from 4-7 p.m. May 21 at Napier Parkview Baptist Church at 245 W. Napier Ave.

Feedback gathered from the public during the first public open house meeting will be used to develop a set of design alternatives which will be presented during the second meeting.

Future open house events will be announced. Anticipated completion of the plan and final recommendations are expected by July.

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