

# PARK(ing) Day

By **LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer** | Posted: **Saturday, September 17, 2016 6:00 am**

**BENTON TOWNSHIP** — The area south of Napier Avenue along Pipestone Road in Benton Township used to be fruit orchards and farm fields.

Now, it is the township's main business district.

“There's more pavement in this area than, really, anywhere else in Berrien, Cass or Van Buren County,” said Marcy Hamilton, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission in Benton Harbor.

Hamilton, along with several other businesses and nonprofit agencies, set up a space at Chemical Bank on Pipestone Road during PARK(ing) Day Friday.

“We're taking over some parking spaces to get some input on this mall area on how ... we can make it more friendly to pedestrians, more friendly to people riding their bikes and ultimately, more friendly to Ox Creek,” she said.

She said when the mall and surrounding areas were orchards and farm fields, rainwater soaked into the ground and was cleaned by the soil before flowing into the creek. Now, the water quickly runs off the roofs and parking lots into the creek, carrying with it pollution and causing the banks to erode, she said.

“The idea is, instead of moving the water off as quickly as possible ... if we can slow it down, spread it out and soak it in, then that allows the water to infiltrate through the ground and all those pollutants are filtered,” she said. “Then, the water reaches the creek at a much slower, cleaner fashion.”

But most of the businesses were built before municipalities required them to build rain gardens or swales to slow down storm water.

Wightman and Associates in Benton Township is planning next spring to turn part of its parking lot along Pipestone Road into a demonstration rain garden, said Suzannah Deneau, an engineer with the civil and environmental engineering firm.

The rain garden will be funded in part from a three-year, \$600,000 state grant received by the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy last fall to clean up and protect the Paw Paw River watershed, which includes Ox Creek.

“We're investigating what we call the ‘mall district,’ which is in the Ox Creek watershed,” she said.



## PARK(ing) Day

Kevin Leong, a student at Andrews University, hangs a banner Friday in celebration of PARK(ing) Day in front of the Chemical Bank along Pipestone Road in Benton Township.

She said the mall district goes from both sides of Mall Drive and follows I-94 to include both sides of Pipestone Road up to Napier Avenue.

“It’s a big sea of asphalt and not a lot of green space,” she said. “We’re investigating what are some ways this community ... can do a little bit. Whenever we do an improvement, can we also make it a greener decision. Wightman is trying to lead that charge by physically doing it ourselves.”

The grant came from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. Several local sources contributed another \$400,000 to match the state money, Hamilton said.

She said it’s important to clean up Ox Creek because it flows into the Paw Paw River, which flows into the St. Joseph River, which ends up in Lake Michigan.

Also at PARK(ing) Day in Benton Township were students from Andrews University.

“We want to be part of this whole movement bringing public spaces into the city,” said Kevin Leong, a graduate student in architecture.

“We want to design places for people,” Celeena Seats, a senior in architecture, said.

One way to make the mall district friendlier for people would be to put in sidewalks, she said.

“There are crosswalks, but there are not sidewalks connecting them,” she said.

Leong said when cars became popular, people started designing places with cars in mind and forgot about the people.

“Now, we’re realizing this is a bad thing and we want to go back to when people used to walk around,” he said. “It creates a healthier community where people walk around. It helps the environment. It’s even more safe.”

Other organizations at the PARK(ing) Day event were officials from the Berrien Conservation District and the Two Rivers Coalition.

PARK(ing) Day was started in 2005 by Rebar, a San Francisco-based art and design studio. The idea is to challenge people to rethink the way streets are used, according to a press release from Wightman and Associates.

Other local communities observing PARK(ing) Day were Benton Harbor and Watervliet.

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