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Plenty of enthusiasm for trails in Cass County

By DEBRA HAIGHT - HP Correspondent 3 hrs ago

DOWAGIAC — Plenty of opportunities are out there for those interested in promoting non-motorized travel in Southwest Michigan. That was the message Wednesday night at the Cass County Non-Motorized Summit held at Southwestern Michigan College.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, along the Michigan Department of Transportation, are sponsoring summits in the seven-county Southwest Michigan region this month. Another summit for Van Buren County residents is scheduled for next Tuesday in Lawrence. The Berrien County summit was held in February at Andrews University.

SMPC Planner Marcy Hamilton told the two dozen or so people gathered Wednesday that people are already working to increase the number of biking and walking trail opportunities in Cass County, and that even more can be done. The purpose of the summits is to gather residents' comments in order to update the MDOT non-motorized trail map for the region.

She said trails can be everything from on-road projects like putting paved shoulders on highways, to off-the-road trails for bicyclists and walkers. She noted that trails have a variety of benefits, ranging from promoting people's health and safety to increasing economic development through tourism and other opportunities.

While creating a mile of off-road trail can cost as much of \$1 million, Hamilton said there are low-cost ways of making roads more bicycle and pedestrian friendly. Those ways include adding bike route signage, adding pavement markings for bike lanes and crosswalks, and restriping roads to reduce the number of car lanes and add a bike lane.

Those speaking at Wednesday's summit included Cass County Parks Director Scott Wyman, Brian Sanada of MDOT, Joe Bellina of the Cass County Road Commission and representatives of area organizations like Bike Michiana.

Wyman said Cass County has some wonderful opportunities to connect communities and people. He said trail systems are already in place around the Russ Forest and Lawless county parks, plus are being developed in Dodd Park in Sumnerville. In addition, there are trail projects underway in Dowagiac, Cassopolis, Vandalia and Edwardsburg.

He said he'd also like to see some rails to trails projects started in the county. "We need to get together as a unit in Cass County and form a group to keep the ball rolling to create non-motorized trails," he said. "There's great potential here even though we may be a little bit behind."

Jamie Stafne of Heart Smart Events spoke about dirt-road bike events her group has sponsored, and said the potential is there to do more. Bike Michiana representatives said their group is already working with organizations in both Berrien and Cass Counties to sponsor bike-friendly events in the area and would like to do more.

Cassopolis resident Taras Lyssenko suggested that those interested in developing more non-motorized opportunities consider working with area snowmobile groups. He noted that these groups already have worked out arrangements with private landowners to go over their land and trail groups could learn from them.