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Residents give input at open house for proposed trail extension

By DEBRA HAIGHT - HP Correspondent Sep 26, 2019

BERRIEN SPRINGS — Bicycle safety is important to Berrien Township resident John Sexton, especially after his friend and fellow bicyclist Todd Harrington was killed in a crash last September on Pokagon Highway.

“I’ve been bicycling for 15 to 20 years and I got involved in the trail effort after Todd was killed,” Sexton said Wednesday at an open house for the proposed trail extension from Niles to Berrien Springs. “I love this route along the old interurban right of way now owned by I&M. There are fewer and less traveled roads to cross.”

Sexton was also among those also supporting the idea of building a pedestrian bridge across Lake Chapin to take the trail directly into the village of Berrien Springs. “I’ve been told we should ask for what we want and we want to build a bridge to cross Lake Chapin to end in Wolf’s Prairie Park.”

Finding a way to cross Lake Chapin is certainly a popular idea for planners.

Kristopher Martin of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and Brian Sanada of the Michigan Department of Transportation both spoke Wednesday of building a pedestrian bridge across that body of water.

Martin noted several of the pillars are still in the lake from when the old interurban rail line crossed Lake Chapin in the late 1800s and early 1900s and could form the basis of a new bridge if found to be still safe.

Sanada said he believes federal transportation grants could be available for such a project. He added that changing the existing M-139 bridge over the St. Joseph River going into Berrien Springs to make it more pedestrian and bicyclist friendly would be much more expensive.

Martin also discussed other reasons why trails are important, including safety concerns like those mentioned by Sexton, as well as the value of trails in terms of economic and community development and promoting health.

As for the status of the existing Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail, Martin said 34 miles of trail from Mishawaka to South Bend to Niles will be complete in 2020.

The current preferred route to go north from Niles to Berrien Springs was the one unveiled in May that uses the old interurban right of way, which runs parallel to and west of M-139. That right of way goes from the north side of Niles to Rangeline Road in Berrien Township.

While I&M owns most of the right of way, concerns from a couple of private property owners have forced a slight route change where the trail would go north along M-139 to either Ullery or Winn Roads before crossing over, Sanada said.

Most of those attending the open house appeared to be enthusiastic about extending the Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail even farther north as possible.

Jeff Perrin of St. Joseph Township said he likes what he's seen concerning the proposed trail between Niles and Berrien Springs. He said he would ultimately like to see the trail go north to St. Joseph and run along Lake Michigan.

"Anyone who does biking on highways with all the traffic would appreciate having a bike trail," he said.

That message was echoed by Jenni Graves of Berrien Township, who came with her two young children.

"I love the idea of a trail," she said. "I live in Berrien Springs and it's scary to bike along M-139."

More than two dozen people attended Wednesday's open house at the Berrien Springs Community Library. The open house was sponsored by the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and Be Healthy Berrien and was the second open house of its kind this year. An earlier open house was held in May at the Niles-Buchanan YMCA.

Organizers said Wednesday they expect a third and final open house to be held either in December or January in Niles or Berrien Springs.

Issues still to be resolved include doing more property research so officials can get a better handle on the possible trail route and securing funding to move forward.