



The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission visited SMC to host a non-motorized transportation summit Wednesday. Brian Sanada, of MDOT, discusses the state's non-motorized initiative. (Leader photo/SARAH CULTON)

SWMPC hosts non-motorized transportation summit at SMC



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Published 8:06 am Friday, June 7, 2019

DOWAGIAC — Wednesday, Cass County community members poured over large maps inside of Southwestern Michigan College's Fred L. Mathews Library Conference Room. Working in groups of five or six, those in the library labeled the maps in different colors to indicate where pedestrian and biking paths currently exist in the county and where community members think they are needed.

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The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission visited SMC to host a non-motorized transportation summit. The summit allowed for residents to participate in a discussion about the potential for bicycling and pedestrian facilities in Cass County. Facilities can include paved shoulders on existing roads and off-road trails to be used by cyclists and pedestrians.

The summit was part of a broader push by the SWMPC to promote non-motorized transportation. The group, having received funding from the Michigan Department of Transportation, is sponsoring a 7-County Non-Motorized Project to identify the need for non-motorized infrastructure in southwest Michigan. Summits similar to Wednesday's are being hosted in seven counties in southwest Michigan. Earlier this year, a summit was hosted in Berrien County.

Representatives with the MDOT, Cass County Parks and the Cass County Conservation District were in attendance Wednesday. All those who spoke at the summit said that they believe there is a need, now more than ever, for non-motorized transportation.

"Our goal is to improve the quality of life for the region, and we feel the non-motorized travel is an important aspect of quality of life for communities," said Marcy Hamilton, of SWMPC.

"We recognize that we have a generation coming up — a younger generation — that is demanding more facilities," added Brian Sanada, of MDOT. "They want to be able to walk and bike to work, to school, to the grocery store — not just for recreation. Then, we have another group — an older generation — who are now retired and want to enjoy the fruits of their labor and have a little bit of leisure time. We have two separate groups that are in the same boat and putting the pressure on us road agencies to do something to create [non-motorized] facilities."

Cass County Parks Director Scott Wyman also spoke at the event. He said that although there are already groups in Cass County working to improve non-motorized transportation, he would like to see more implemented. In particular, he has been working to gauge the possibility of turning an abandoned railroad track into a trail. Eventually, Wyman said he would like to see the trail connect Vandalia and Cassopolis to Dr. T.K. Lawless Park.

"We definitely want to see this be a part of Cass County's future. Cass County has wonderful opportunities for non-motorized transportation," he said. "It's a way to get around the county without a vehicle, which is good for exercise and less pollution."

Several in attendance at the summit, which included biking and outdoors groups, said they were excited about the prospect of additional non-motorized facilities in the county. County Commissioners Michael Grice and Skip Dyes attended the event Wednesday, saying that as county leaders, they wanted to learn more.

"[Non-motorized facilities] brings revenue, brings people," Grice said. "This is very important to the people in Cass County."

"Gen-Xers need bike trails — it's one of the things they want when they move to a new area," Dyes added. "This is just an economic development issue. ... I'm just here to get guidance to see how we can get started."

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