

TWIN CITIES AREA TRANSPORTATION STUDY

Minutes

Non-motorized Subcommittee Meeting

February 24, 2010

8:00 A.M.

Abonmarche, 95 W. Main St., Benton Harbor, MI 49022

TWINCATS COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES PRESENT:	Chris Cook, City of Benton Harbor (Abonmarche Consultants) William Fryer, City of St. Joseph Larry Merritt, St. Joseph Charter Township / Merritt Engineering Kevin Reed, Berrien County Road Commission Sarah Woolcock, MDOT – Coloma TSC
SWMPC STAFF PRESENT:	Nickolas Musson Anna Rahtz Suzann Flowers
OTHERS PRESENT:	Theresa Green, Berrien County Health Department Mark Hesemann, Evergreen Management / Harbor Shores Mike Jones, Cycle and Fitness

1. CALL TO ORDER & INTRODUCTIONS:

- Subcommittee Chairman Cook called the meeting to order at 8:02 A.M.

2. SMART BERRIEN COUNTY TRAILS INPUT MEETING REPORT:

- Flowers reported that the Trails Input Meeting for Berrien County had a turnout of around 50 people, higher than the other eight counties. She shared the maps that had been produced from the meeting, which show the on-road and off-road facilities within Berrien County that are existing, planned, proposed, and desired.
- Merritt remarked that there had been broad geographic representation at the SMART meeting, including St. Joseph, Berrien Springs, Buchanan, Niles, and New Buffalo areas. However, the Benton Harbor area and Northern parts of the county had not been represented at the meeting, and so their input should still be added to the maps.
- It was agreed that the maps need to be zoomed in on the Twin Cities area so that the subcommittee can take a more focused look at which roads need to be made safer for non-motorized travel in the region, which is the primary mission of the subcommittee. It was also discussed that the boundaries of the "Twin Cities area" can also be defined in different ways because of the satellite of Michiana and Grand Haven. It was decided that for the next meeting there will be a series of different scale maps zooming in on different areas within the Twin Cities region.

3. PRIORITY CONNECTIONS FOR TWIN CITIES AREA:

- Those present reviewed the maps from the SMART meeting in order to assess the priority non-motorized facilities needed within the Twin Cities area to connect with the surrounding areas.
- Jones stated that he and a group of cyclists already ride on an abandoned rail bed that is currently a dirt surface. It connects from Lincoln Avenue in St. Joseph Township to Clementine's Restaurant in St. Joseph City. He explained that he knows of a donor who is willing to give \$500,000 toward paving it as a trail, and that he also knows of a \$30,000 grant opportunity that he could apply for. The only obstacles to completing the project are finding the rest of the funding and helping the City and Township to overcome issues of property owner opposition. Jones explained that he and his fellow cyclists have had run-ins with two property owners along the route who do not want cyclists on their property for fear of liability.
- There was a discussion about the two widespread fears that property owners have: 1) that cyclists will leave the trail and come onto their property to steal or vandalize; 2) that if a cyclist, snow mobile rider, etc. is injured on their property, they will be liable to be sued.
- Hesemann and Flowers discussed the fact that, in reality, a trail typically increases the value of

surrounding properties and that trails have not been shown to lead to increases in crime. Hesemann stated that it's necessary to continue providing examples, such as the Monan Trail in Indianapolis, of successful trail projects in order to overcome such fears. Flowers added that there will soon be a good example completed in nearby Kalamazoo.

- It was mentioned that in several cases, No Trespassing signs have been installed on trails that are actually open to the public so that if a cyclist sues the property owner over an injury on the trail, the property owner can claim that the cyclist was trespassing.
- Hesemann added that Harbor Shores will have all its trails completed by the end of 2011. They will technically be open to the public, but there will likely be signage put up to discourage the public from using the innermost trails nearest the golfers because of the likelihood of the trail users being injured by a stray golf ball. He stated that Abonmarche has prepared a chart letting the public know which trails are safe and which are unsafe to use.
- Green mentioned that the Berrien County Health Department has been looking into grant funding to develop the abandoned rail bed from Benton Harbor to Sodus as a trail, with the help of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.
- Reed added that he thought there may be municipal easements along the abandoned rail beds in question, and in those cases the State of Michigan would cover liability.
- Reed mentioned that the Berrien County Road Commission and MDOT are looking into reducing a four-lane section of Red Arrow Highway to three lanes and adding wide outside paved shoulders.
- Woolcock stated that MDOT is now required to include wide shoulders with any reconstruction project. They are also required to corrugate the asphalt between the shoulder and the traffic lane to buffer the cyclists on the shoulder from the car traffic, but the MDOT – Coloma TSC has had more public opposition to the asphalt corrugation than anywhere in the State. Hagar Shores residents have complained about the noise caused by cars driving over the rough texture in the asphalt.
- Woolcock added that MDOT has recently reconstructed all the State-owned roads within Berrien County to add the three-foot shoulders, except for M-140 South of I-94. Jones stated that he has ridden on State roads, such as M-63, that only have a one-foot shoulder, and Woolcock responded that they may be getting striped wrong.
- Jones added that another safety issue for cyclists can be when drivers cannot estimate how fast bicycles are going and turn in front of them. He stated that widespread driver education is needed.

4. US BIKE ROUTE 35:

- Flowers explained that Paul Vandenbosch, out of South Haven, is leading Southwest Michigan's participation in a nationwide long-distance bike route project led by AASHTO and the Adventure Cycling Association. The US Bike Route 35 will traverse the entire Eastern shoreline of Lake Michigan and connect to another route that runs across Northern Indiana into Chicago. The purpose of the US Bike Route project is for serious cyclists to have a designated route to connect long distances between communities, taking them from city center to city center. The project is not taking on any right-of-way acquisition or construction, but is focusing on placing uniform signage on roadways.
- Flowers explained that Route 35 will hug the shoreline as closely as possible to take advantage of the lake views, and so most of the portion in Southwest Michigan will fall along Red Arrow Highway or Blue Star Highway. Rahtz added that the route jogs off onto lighter-traffic roadways through St. Joseph, and that the Paul Vandenbosch has uploaded the route onto Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com/maps/user?uid=100659347579183230280&hl=en&gl=us&ptab=2>) for anyone to make alterations. Flowers reiterated that the route is not finalized, and that Mr. Vandenbosch is seeking input on it.
- Woolcock asked why the Michigan Department of Transportation has not been included in the process. Flowers responded that that would be a question for Paul Vandenbosch. He initially took on the project, and has designated a specific order for input on the route. He is planning to hold public input meetings, and then the routes will go to the county road commissions for approval, then to the State for approval. Josh DeBruyn is the contact at MDOT for this project.
- Rahtz mentioned that John Hodgson at the City of St. Joseph is the St. Joseph – Benton Harbor area representative attending the US Bike Route 35 meetings for Southwest Michigan, as appointed by Mr.

Vandenbosch. She added that Mr. Hodgson requested that this subcommittee discuss the alignment of the 35 route and see if they had any input on it.

- There was discussion about whether Red Arrow Highway and Blue Star Highway are safe routes for cyclists, and whether signing them as a Bike Route would give cyclists a false sense of security. Cook commented that the mission of the US Bike Route project does not seem totally aligned with the mission of this subcommittee.
- Jones led a discussion on the route that he takes to cycle North from Harbor Shores in Benton Harbor to Van Buren County. He mentioned that he uses low-volume roads such as Riverside Drive that take him within a mile of Van Buren County. It was suggested that this route be given as an alternative to Mr. Vandenbosch for the route that should be signed as the US 35 Bike Route. Flowers added that this route would also be useful for connecting from the Twin Cities area to the Kal-Haven Trail. Jones added that he frequently sends tourists in St. Joseph to South Haven because the Kal-Haven Trail is the closest long-distance trail that is safe for families to cycle on.

5. NEXT STEPS:

- Musson suggested that a Non-motorized Visioning Session be held, in which the subcommittee members (those present at this meeting) go over more detailed maps of the Twin Cities area, including aerial maps, and draw on them to determine what priority connections are needed. These ideas should then be incorporated into a TwinCATS Non-motorized Plan, which would become a part of the Long Range Transportation Plan. This would give the non-motorized ideas more stature within TwinCATS and allow them to affect future project selection.
- Rahtz stated that the subcommittee needed to come up with a brand for itself and the Visioning Session, such as "Walk and Bike" Berrien County to reflect the subcommittee's mission so that she could advertise it and get people to attend. She added that this meeting had primarily focused on recreational cycling; whereas part of the mission of the subcommittee was to address pedestrian safety and the need for sidewalks, such as in Benton Township. This is why a brand such as "Walk and Bike" is needed.
- It was agreed that such a Visioning Session would be held amongst those present at this meeting first, to prepare what the message would be to the public. Then a public charrette could be held at a later date.
- It was established that the SWMPC staff will obtain aerial views of the Twin Cities area from Reed at the County Road Commission, and will compile the maps for the visioning session.
- Flowers passed out invitations for a Trails Workshop Series that is being co-sponsored by the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission in the spring through fall of 2010. The registration information is available at <http://swmpc.org/trailsworkshop.asp>.

9. ADJOURNMENT: 9:45 a.m.

- Next meeting is March 10, 2010 at 8:00 A.M. at the Abonmarche Office.

Compiled by: SWMPC staff, 2/25/10