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Niles continues moving forward with its environmental sustainability programs

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At a Feb. 12 public hearing, the Niles Board of Trustees and interested residents sat through a presentation of the Niles Environmental Action Plan.

"Niles is being really forward-thinking," said Kristen Ihnchak, a senior planner with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. She was there to present the plan's proposed initiatives to the board at the hearing. "The plan has a lot of recommendations that have a lot of different topics."

CMAP was created to integrate planning for land use and transportation for the northeastern Illinois counties of Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will. To address anticipated population growth of more than 2 million new residents by 2040, CMAP has established coordinated strategies that help the region's 284 communities address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment and other quality-of-life issues.

One of those recommendations in Niles includes updating the village's development regulations to remove barriers and encourage sustainable practices, the adoption of a municipal policy to build any new village facilities and retro-fit existing facilities to recognized green building standards.

Additionally Ihnchak said creating a green handbook and pursuing LEED, or similar, certification for a municipal facility is an additional step that could be taken.

The Niles Environmental Action Plan is just one of the many that CMAP has helped create. Currently CMAP is providing technical assistance to about 100 communities to create comprehensive plans with environmental sustainability. For Niles, the initial steps of this process began in July of last year involved four Steering Committee meetings, stakeholder interviews and meetings with village staff.

One area that Niles is currently working on, but still has much to do, was in the creation of a village-wide bicycle and pedestrian plan. CMAP recommended the village promote alternative transportation and permit and/or require the installation of bicycle facilities throughout the community.

"We tried; it's just not a safe environment," said Niles Assistant Village Manager Steven Vinezeano previously about creating dedicated bike lanes on Niles' Milwaukee Avenue. He added that Illinois officials have repeatedly told Niles they don't want bicycles on that section of the road due to the perceived danger that motorists would cause cyclists.

Vinezeano has said that on Milwaukee Avenue between Albion Avenue and Gold Road, the chances of adding a bike lane are non-existent. But the village, in its comprehensive transportation plan, is very interested in pursuing a village-wide bicycle plan in the near future.

However, CMAP already has worked with the Cook County Forest Preserve District to extend the North Branch Bicycle Trail, the longest linear trail in the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's system.

Currently, the trail ends at the intersection of Devon and Caldwell, but the trail will now be extended three miles south, as far as the Irene Hernandez Woods at Foster and Kostner. This route extension will allow cyclists to merge onto City of Chicago on-street bike lanes to reach the Chicago lakefront trail without having to navigate streets not friendly to bike traffic.

The trail will run through Niles and Morton Grove and end at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glenocoe. Once all the expansion is completed, the trail will connect to the Greenway Trail in Lake County, as well as to Metra and PACE lines.

At the meeting, Trustee Joe Lovèerde asked Ihnchak if her experience partnering with Cook County Forest Preserve District could lead to the village adding sections of the forests they oversee as more green open spaces under the purview of Niles.

Vinezeano said continuing to connect bike and pedestrian access to the Cook County Forest Preserve's trails will create the perception of more open spaces for Niles residents.