

# Niles planning new ways to get around

BY IGOR STUDENKOV | Contributor May 23, 2013 6:26PM

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If you're a bicyclist, Niles has some things to offer.

The North Branch bike trail runs through the village, along the Chicago River. Niles Free Bus vehicles are equipped with bike racks, and so are many Niles public buildings.

But the village hasn't done much to expand its biking infrastructure and facilities – until now.

The Niles Multi-Modal Plan Steering Committee is taking its first steps toward developing a Village of Niles Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. With help from consultant Sam Schwartz Engineering and the Niles Department of Community Planning, the committee is working on ways to make it easier for bicyclists and pedestrians to get to work, shopping areas and recreational destinations.

Bruce Sylvester, Niles' Senior Planner, estimates that the final version of the plan will be ready within the year's time.

The plan wouldn't have gotten off the ground at all if it weren't for a grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, a Northeast Illinois regional planning government organization. The grant allowed the village to hire a transportation firm to advise the Steering Committee on the engineering and logistical aspects of the planning process. The Department of Community Planning worked together with CMAP staff to evaluate the proposals, eventually settling on Schwartz Engineering.

But it is the steering committee that will dictate the overall direction of the plan. The all-volunteer committee includes residents, seniors, youth, business owners, representatives from transportation agencies such as PACE and IDOT, and bicycle enthusiasts.

Joe Reichert, owner of Amling's Cycle bicycle shop, said the committee is looking to the future.

"It's our job to come up with what we want Niles to be in 1-2 years," he said. "We are looking to create a plan that the village will be able to implement."

At this point, the plan is still in the very early stages. The Steering Committee had its first meeting on April 25, and the next meeting date hasn't been set yet. But the committee is already considering a major outreach event to gather input from as many Niles residents as possible.

The event is tentatively planned for some time this summer. Steering Committee is considering a number of potential activities, including a bike rodeo for kids, a short bike tour of the Forest Preserve trails, a bike helmet giveaway and safety booths.

Sylvester emphasized that the list of activities won't be finalized until the next meeting.

The Steering Committee also plans to get community input through social media, and Schwartz Engineering will be collecting information on its own.

Reichert feels strongly that the plan will benefit Niles. Right now, too many residents rely on cars to take short shopping trips. If the village has the infrastructure and facilities to support biking, more people will embrace it as a viable alternative. The fact that bicycling is a form of exercise doesn't hurt, either.

"A lot of people could get their shopping done by bike," said Reichert. "And I think people will feel better when they do."~.

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