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Niles looking to improve bike, pedestrian transportation

December 04, 2013 | By Lee V. Gaines, Special to the Tribune

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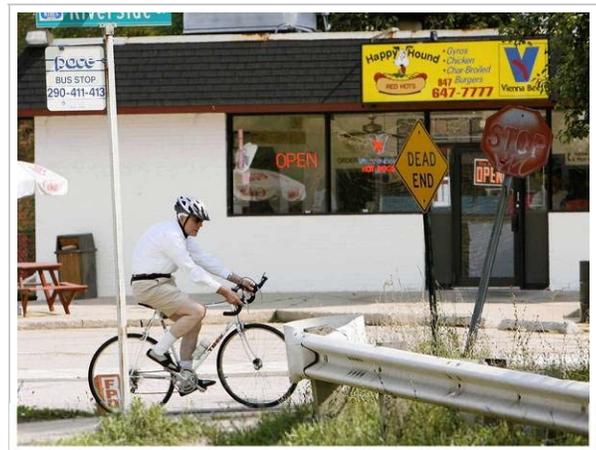
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The Niles community development department is currently working with engineering consultants to develop a plan to improve transportation for pedestrians and bicyclists in the village.

The village recently hired Sam Schwartz Engineering, a company involved in creating pedestrian and bicycling plans for both Chicago and Downers Grove, using \$89,000 in grant [funds](#) from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Niles officials said.



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The firm was chosen for its "very intensive community involvement and community participation methods," said the village's senior planner, Bruce Sylvester.

At public hearings and open [houses](#), municipal officials and consultants often "hear from the same select few people," said Stacy Meekins, a senior planner for Sam Schwartz Engineering.

To reach those who are less engaged but who may have a stake in the issue nonetheless, Meekins said her firm held pop-up meetings and attended events frequented by bicyclists and pedestrians.

But there are few community events for either bikers or walkers to attend in the village, she said.

"One of the things missing in Niles for bikes is this culture around it, and that is just as important as having bike lanes," Meekins said.

To foster a discussion about bicycling in the community, the firm hosted an event called Bike Niles, which Meekins considered "one of the successes of the plan."

Planning for a second biking event is already in the works.

Additionally, she said the firm posted an online survey, which elicited about 100 responses from residents.

The data showed 91 percent of survey respondents said they'd like to bike to work and [drive](#) less in Niles, while 82 percent said they'd like to walk more, Meekins said.

But according to the survey, fewer than half of respondents said they felt comfortable biking or walking in the village, Meekins said.

Meekins said that's likely due to current infrastructure conditions for both activities.

Though the sidewalk network is "pretty good" compared to other municipalities, "there are some gaps and that can limit people from [walking or biking]," she said.

[Streets](#) in Niles also carry a lot of traffic, which creates a big challenge for bicyclists and pedestrians trying to cross busy intersections.

And while the North Branch Trail is a "huge regional [asset](#)," there is no on-street bike network to allow cyclists to access the trail, she said.

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Specific intersections and streets, including Milwaukee Avenue, Oakton Street, Dempster Street and Howard Street, among others, were cited as particularly problematic for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Generally, the residents interviewed and those who responded to the survey want better street crossings, more bike lanes and more sidewalks, Meekins said.

A draft of recommendations is almost complete, she said, and likely will be presented to the public in January.

Following the presentation, the firm will develop an implementation plan for the recommendations and a final plan and report to be presented in March.

Sylvester said village department heads plan to meet in order to "start talking about getting funds included in appropriate department budgets" to implement the recommendations.

Though analysis and planning for the project was funded through the CMAP grant, implementation of the recommendations would be financed by the village, Sylvester said in an interview following the presentation.

He added that the village would also apply for any grant funds available.

Whatever the plan presented next year stipulates, Sylvester said the changes would be gradual, with

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recommendations incorporated into the village budget over the span of many years.

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