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Input sought for changes to Des Plaines River Trail

October 11, 2013 | By Elizabeth Owens-Schiele, Special to the Tribune

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The Northwest Municipal Conference has spearheaded an effort to improve the multi-use Des Plaines River Trail and is seeking online input from trail users.

The Des Plaines River Trail Corridor Plan, paid for with an \$88,000 grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, focuses on [potential](#)  improvements on the trail along the Des Plaines River between Higgins Road and Lake Cook Road, according to Mike Walczak, director of transportation for the Northwest Municipal Conference.

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Consultants to the project are currently seeking public input via an online survey at nwmc-cog.org to determine how local residents access the trail, how they use it as pedestrians, bikers or equestrians, and what improvements these users would like to see along the trail.

"The main themes of the survey are where people want to see improved crossings, find out how people get to the trail — walking, biking or [driving](#)  — and what their main access point is," Walczak said. "For the infrastructure needs, this feedback will go a long way to help us form some recommendations."

The website hosts the online survey — created a few weeks ago — which takes an estimated 10 minutes to complete, Walczak said, along with an online mapping tool enabling regular trail users to identify conditions that need to be improved such as difficult crossings or poor trail conditions or desired access points, including where there are unofficial trails started from neighborhoods nearby.

Beginning in June, a steering committee led by Northwest Municipal Conference, officials from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Cook County Forest Preserve, Illinois Department of Transportation as well as Des Plaines, Park Ridge, Niles, Prospect Heights, Mount Prospect, Glenview, Northbrook and

Wheeling, began meeting and recognized that ongoing issues along the trail were local access and east-west thoroughfares that interrupted pedestrian traffic.

"A lot of times, there are no sidewalks or bike paths connecting neighborhoods to the trail," Walczak said.

The committee hopes to create better local access so driving to the trail won't be necessary. The plan, he added, is expected to also improve amenities at trail heads, create better signage along the trail and direct people to the trail, as well as improve parking lots.

Bill Schmoldt, owner since 1980 of Prospect Bikes and Trains, 506 E. Northwest Highway in Mount Prospect, said he has been biking the Des Plaines River Trail just blocks from his Des Plaines [home](#) for more than 20 years and doesn't see a need to blacktop the trail.

"They should leave the trail finished with the ground stone," Schmoldt said, noting there are other area bike trails that are paved including Busse Woods in Elk Grove and the North Branch Trail from Caldwell Woods north to the Chicago Botanic Garden.

"The gravel is a good surface to ride on and it prevents people from going way too [fast](#), especially racing bikes," Schmoldt said. "Plus, there are people on horses on this trail, and you can't go flying by them and spook the horse."

He describes the trail as "tranquil" and "a great trail to ride on and [discover](#) wildlife you don't see in your backyard" and sees the online survey as an excellent tool to offer feedback on the trail experience.

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Although he said he didn't give too much thought to trail improvements when he met with the steering committee in recent months, he said he instead focused on how users were getting to the trail.

"The trail has decent access, but there are a few spots with sand that are not the greatest," Schmoldt said.

According to Walczak, the Chicago planning firm Houseal Lavigne Associates, the Active Transportation Alliance and Gewalt Hamilton Associates have been conducting background research on the trail, focusing on trail conditions, intersections and crossings, as well as trail amenities in general.

The first draft of the consultants' report will be reviewed at a public meeting of the steering committee planned for Oct. 22 at the Northwest Municipal Conference, 1600 E. Golf Road in Des Plaines.

Walczak anticipates trail recommendations will be wrapped up by April of 2014, at which point the committee plans to host public meetings followed by an actual trail ride where members of public and public officials will be invited to see the recommendations rolled out along the trail.

Walczak anticipates some of the easier, lower-cost fixes could happen as soon as late next year.

The group would also seek federal funding grants and sources such as the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program or the Transportation Alternatives Program to help cover long-term improvements.

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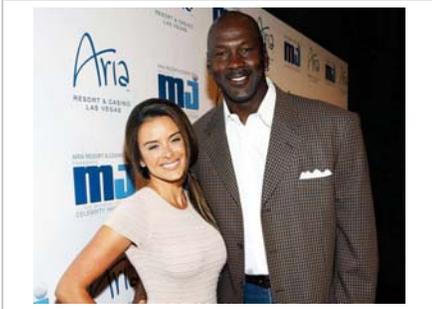
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