

NIRPC begins survey on travel habits of residents

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Tim Zorn

Thousands of Northwest Indiana households will have chances soon to earn \$20 rewards for helping the region's transportation planners.

Between now and November, the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission is sending out 50,000 surveys to randomly selected households in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties.

The surveys ask how, when, where, and why the respondents travel around the region – to work, for shopping, to visit friends, and so on, and whether by car, train, bus, bike, or on foot.

"Collecting this information through a survey is the only way to accurately measure and understand people's changing travel behaviors," a NIRPC news release says. "Understanding these patterns helps ensure that funding to improve roads, bridges, and transit is spent where it is needed most."

NIRPC, which coordinates the region's transportation planning, hopes to get at least 2,000 survey responses.

"If we get more, that information would be useful," transportation planner Scott Weber added.

If the idea of helping plan the region's transportation future isn't enough, NIRPC planners hope the \$20 payment is an incentive to complete the household surveys.

Personal identification is not recorded, Weber said.

The last such NIRPC survey was in 2007-8. The information collected then is nearing the end of its useful life, planners say.

This year's survey, like that a decade ago, is conducted in conjunction with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which coordinates planning in seven Northeast Illinois counties.

The survey consulting firm is Westat, a research corporation based in Rockville, MD. The previous survey's consultant is out of business, Weber said.

Each survey will ask the responding household to track its members' travels on a particular day. It should take about 10 minutes to complete, Weber said.

The survey response can be returned in one of four ways, Weber said: by mail, online, with a smartphone app, or by phone.

If an assigned day isn't practical – for example, if someone's going to be out of town – another day can be requested.

The survey's consultants have randomly selected addresses to ensure a sample representative of the region's diversity, Weber said.

He expects that the survey data collection will be complete by the end of November, and that a report will be presented in January.

Tim Zorn is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.