

Bicycling Friendly Community
Infrastructure Planning Session Minutes
Kalamazoo County Road Commission Building Held on April 12, 2012
Distributed April 24, 2012

Participants

Chris Barnes, Director, Transportation and Utilities, City of Portage
Joanna Johnson, Managing Director, Kalamazoo County Road Commission
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Paul Selden, Director of Road Safety, Kalamazoo Bicycle Club, Member, TriKats
Steve Stepek, Senior Transportation Planner, Kalamazoo Area Transportation Study

The following is a synopsis of the infrastructure planning meeting held on April 12, 2012 at the Kalamazoo County Road Commission building, with additional material added by Joanna Johnson and Paul Selden as an aid to clarity and to facilitate understanding of the background.

Introduction

Under the current status of Michigan law, there is limited liability to transportation agencies. According to the information presented in our February 29 meeting, currently the courts have decided in favor of a “bicycle friendly” direction, limiting aspects of legal liability. This may change with court decisions or legislation in the future; such a “wild card” is ever-looming and the tolerance for such uncertainty may also play a part in decision-making.

Goal

The goal of this meeting was to list obstacles and constraints that remain, that are most likely to stand in the way of agreed-on high-level BFC infrastructure objectives, now that the legal liability question has been clarified. The group was to suggest ideas for viable solutions (time permitting).

One example of an infrastructure objective is to post “Share the Road” type signs on roadways. (“Share the Road” is a placeholder for the many types of bicycle related safety signs, such as “Bike Route,” “Bike Lane,” etc. Other objectives include, but were not limited to, providing maps, directions and paths.) On Monday April 9, Texas Township approved the purchase and installation of 20 bike safety related signs, so the issue regarding signage is very current.

Summary

Joanna Johnson had a fair amount of preliminary information to present as background for the participants, so the moderator set aside the structured approach originally planned for the meeting, in favor of an informal discussion. The question of specific obstacles that will impede adoption of infrastructure-related ideas was set aside for the moment.

The gist of the discussion can be summarized briefly. Members of the community not familiar with what goes into traffic engineering decisions may find it especially interesting.

Infrastructure planning follows principles that have been set forth over time for the same reasons as in any engineering discipline. Principles related to consistency, clear visual cueing, economy, and cost-benefit apply to many disciplines. Similar principles also apply to roadway infrastructure design. For example, traffic engineers recommend posting permanently placed signs to cue users to the presence of permanent or highly predictable features, to improve traffic flow and improve safety.

As one example, a sign prior to an upcoming low bridge would typically be placed, whereas a permanent sign that posts a seasonal and changeable recreational bicycle route, such as the “XYZ Bicycle Club’s Thursday Night Ride” where a ride leader changes the route each week, or cancels it based on poor attendance, would be placed only if additional reasons for placing such a sign were very compelling.

On the other hand, signs justifiably mark directions to permanent public parks, and their bicycling counterparts, such as the Portage Bikeway and the Kalamazoo River Valley Trail. Such signs improve traffic flow, reduce possible confusion, and so subsequent traffic accidents. Incidentally, such signs also serve as an ongoing reminder to users of a public good they can take advantage of. Signs directing the way to major overpasses and bridges could be considered as universally helpful to motorized and non-motorized users.

Standards such as the “Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities” published by AASHTO, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, are used to help engineers design a wide variety of infrastructure improvements, including where to place bicycle related signs. Generally speaking, such guidelines recommend that a certain amount of shoulder width (e.g., four feet) bounded by a fog line be available for a route to be considered a viable bicycle route. Such considerations are just one part of criteria used when deciding whether to mark it with bike route signage. Under current Michigan law, as long as the bicycle path is separated from the portion of the highway that is “designated for vehicular travel,” there would be limited liability to transportation agencies arising from “issues” involving a bicycle path. Simply posting a sign would not provide the same degree “protection” from liability, that, for example, physically separating the bicycle path from the motorized portion of the road.

Who posts bicycle signs, how they are funded, their background color and font style and size, and the symbols used, involves jurisdictional considerations as well as engineering judgment. This adds to the complexity of decision making and planning, which typically adds time to the overall process from initial conception to implementation.

With this in mind, the general direction for bicycle infrastructure planning is:

- continue to gather ideas for bicycle routes, as we have been doing, using Paul Selden as a conduit to call for and pass the routes on to the Kalamazoo Area Transportation Study (KATS)
- use private resources such as a “Bike Friendly Kalamazoo” website to host maps
- continue to overlay those routes against the long-term plans and maps being charted by the KATS, under the leadership of Steve Stepek
- expand the planning to include safe routes to school, pending a volunteer willing to take this aspect up in particular.

In a nutshell, with continued proper planning, preparation and adequate funding, there is room for justifiable planned infrastructure improvements that will help bicyclists and other classes of non-motorized users, and motorists as well.

Next Steps

Paul Selden will schedule a background briefing on the principles of traffic engineering as applies to bike routing from Jim Hoesktra, KCRC’s traffic engineer (who is working in a shared capacity with the City of Kalamazoo).

Paul Selden will request a one on one meeting with Joanna Johnson to list additional specific impediments regarding the community's bike-related infrastructure ideas.

A call out will be made to seek volunteers willing to lead or participate in a safe routes to school effort.