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October, 2018

Walk/BikeLV is Coming

Imagine a region where roads, sidewalks, trails and transit all work in harmony. A region where most anyone can safely get from one end of the Lehigh Valley to the other without needing a car. A region where pedestrians, bicyclists and air quality are a priority.

That's the goal of Walk/BikeLV, the Lehigh Valley's first ever Active Transportation Masterplan.

The LVPC and partners that include PennDOT, the US Department of Transportation and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources last week kicked off a nearly yearlong study designed to provide a blueprint not only for how to connect the region's sidewalk, trail, transit and road networks, but how to pay for it.

It's a lofty enterprise, but one every bit as important as those road-widening and bridge projects that tend to get the headlines, said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley.

"We invest a lot of money on transportation, but it's largely been focused on vehicles," Bradley said. "We need to give people more options to get out of their cars. This isn't just about recreation. It affects our economy, it impacts our air quality and it impacts quality of life in general."

The kickoff was the first meeting of the Multimodal Working Group, a committee of the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study, which allocates more than \$130 million a year in transportation funding for Lehigh and Northampton counties.

The LVPC, which administrates the LVTS, has partnered with Silver Spring, MD-based Toole Design Group and a host of community organizations to analyze gaps in the trail, sidewalk, road and transit connections for pedestrian and bicyclists. Once those barriers are identified, a plan will be devised to fill the gaps and grow the network, creating a fully connected network that allows people to not only recreate, but commute through the Lehigh Valley without their cars. The plan will prioritize pedestrian connections to transit stops and determine if things such as a regional bike share program are doable.

The effort has buy-in from the transportation and natural resources communities. Additional partners include D&L Trail, Wildland Conservancy, LANta, Community Bike Works, the September 11th National Memorial Trail, the Coalition for Appropriate Transportation and Discover Lehigh Valley.

The plan is expected to be completed by June of 2019. Executing it will take years of commitment to prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists – and lots of money – but Toole Design Senior Planner Jim Elliott said this is the right time to embark on such a culture change.

“The time is right. A revolution is afoot in transportation that is focused on walking and biking,” Elliott told 70 transportation and community leaders from across the region. “We know from the tremendous investment that companies like Lyft and Uber are dumping into bike-sharing and ride-sharing that this is going to be big business. This is the perfect time to do this in the Lehigh Valley.”

A recent Valleywide survey by the LVPC appears to back that up. In it, the number one thing people said they liked most about living in the Lehigh Valley was its parks, trails and recreation opportunities. What they liked least was traffic.

And those beliefs go well beyond this region. Amazon is in the midst of a yearlong search to find a city for a second headquarter where 50,000 Amazon employees should be located. Among its biggest requirements for its new headquarters – the city must have a robust multimodal network.

According to the 2017 National Household Travel Survey, 43% of all trips by vehicle are less than three miles, 75% of those are done by car and 52% of all people would like to drive less.

“That means we have a huge opportunity here to convert a lot of those trips to modes that don’t involve cars,” Elliott said.

The people at the kickoff echoed those sentiments. During an exercise in which participants used an online app to post their vision for the plan, the words most used were “connectivity, safety and access.” And they said their highest priority for what the plan should be “safer walking and bicycling routes” and “connecting people with where they want to go.”

One of the biggest messages from the kickoff was the idea that everyone is encouraged to contribute. Working Group meetings at Northampton Community College will be open to anyone who wants their ideas considered, or just wants to know more about how the plan progresses. More information is available at <http://www.lvpc.org/walkbikelv.html>.

“We have a chance to do something really special here,” Bradley said. “This is something that in 10 or 20 years people will look back and see this as the time we started to think differently about transportation.”

