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Get out of the car and onto the trail

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Marin County has \$25 million to spend on traffic congestion by building a network of walking and biking trails. The problem is that county officials and bike advocates have at least \$100 million worth of ideas to achieve that goal.

"We totaled the infrastructure costs back in 2001 and came up with \$100 million. And we've come up with a number of new projects going forward," said Deb Hubsmith, advocacy director for the 1,500-member Marin County Bicycle Coalition.

"The pilot program will pick the projects most suited to our long-term goal, which is to create a bicycle and pedestrian network that gets people out of their cars," she said.

Officials are asking Marin residents to help choose the best of those proposals - and submit a few of their own. The county will hold the first public workshop on its Nonmotorized Transportation Pilot Program on Wednesday at the Embassy Suites Hotel in San Rafael.

Marin is one of four communities nationwide chosen to receive a \$25 million grant by the \$268.5 billion 2005 federal transportation bill. The other three are Columbia, Mo; Minneapolis-St. Paul; and Sheboygan County, Wis.

The program was created to find out whether encouraging more commuters to walk and bike can significantly impact an area's traffic congestion.

Even the most die-hard advocates of nonmotorized transportation admit walking or biking to work every day may not be practical for many commuters. But county officials hope residents will consider leaving their cars at home for many of the other journeys they take each day.

"I'm not talking about that trip to the hardware store to buy a new refrigerator," said Craig Tackaberry, assistant county public works director. "But taking that letter to the post office, or renting that video, or going to the bank to make a deposit - those are the kinds of trips where we hope people will consider walking or biking."

About 41 percent of the automobile trips taken in the United States are two miles or less and could be accomplished on foot or bicycle, Hubsmith said.

"It takes a change of mind-set and the skills to be able to commute in traffic," she said.

The county already has recommended a variety of proposals to make it easier for walkers and bikers to get around. In addition to the countywide Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, many of the county's cities and towns have their own wish lists of biking trails and improvements.

On Oct. 10, the Board of Supervisors hired consultant Alta Planning and Design to - with the help of the Transportation Authority of Marin - sort through various plans and determine which are most likely to get commuters out of their cars.

"We're looking at ones that are ready to go, that could be completed by 2009," said Supervisor Steve Kinsey. "We're not looking at pie-in-the-sky projects."

Those goals could include one or more large-scale capital projects. The Central Marin Ferry Connector Project, for example, would build a bicycle and pedestrian bridge on the site of a former railroad trestle over Corte Madera Creek.

"The bridge would link up with the Cal Park Tunnel, which is scheduled to open in 2008," said Hubsmith, who estimated the cost of the project at \$8.5 million.

"It would allow pedestrians and bicyclists to travel all the way from the Larkspur ferry terminal to the transit center in San Rafael without having to cross any roadways," she said.

They also could include smaller-scale projects. Columbia, for example, is considering programs that would encourage businesses to use bike messengers, partner new bicycling commuters with "bike buddies" to show them the ropes and possibly create a "bribe-a-bike-rider lottery," giving \$100 to a randomly selected individual riding a bicycle.

In Marin, officials have considered expanding the size of the bike racks available on all county buses and improving the signs available for cyclists.

Biking advocates suffered a setback earlier this month when voters scuttled a quarter-cent sales tax proposal to pay for the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit project. That program would

have included a 70-mile bicycle and pedestrian pathway.

County officials say money from the pilot program could be used to pay for construction of part of the SMART pathway, but that it was unlikely to pay for the entire trail.

"By no means do we have the budget to accomplish what SMART would have done," Supervisor Kinsey said. "But the gap closure project, which would extend the biking and pedestrian facilities to the downtown transit center - that's an idea we could consider."

A 19-member advisory committee, appointed by the county public works director, will consider all of these proposals. The committee, which met for the first time Nov. 14, will present its recommendations to the public works department in March.

"After that, those proposals will have to go through the process of environmental review, which could take about a year," Supervisor Charles McGlashan said. "We'll spend six months to a year in construction, which puts us into '09. So it's a tight deadline."

The federal government will use criteria being developed by the University of Minnesota to evaluate the ability of each project to convince drivers to become bikers and walkers. The county will submit its final report to the government in 2010.

"It's really an awesome responsibility, and an awesome opportunity we have to show Congress that investing in bicycle and pedestrian travel, rather than always widening highways, is worth it," McGlashan said.

IF YOU GO

The Marin County Department of Public Works will host a workshop on its Nonmotorized Transportation Pilot Program from 6 to 9 p.m. Wednesday at the Embassy Suites Hotel at 101 McInnis Parkway in San Rafael. For more information, visit www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/pw/main/NTPP.cfm.

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