

The Oldham Era

Walkable community workshop offers insight on Ky. 393

By Julie Satterly

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There was no doubt about it. Paul Clinton felt out of place.

As his shoes sank in the mud and his jacket became more damp from the drizzling rain, Clinton watched as school buses took over the access road near the Ky. 393 school campus that was once occupied by a small group of pedestrians.

When asked how he felt about having to push himself off the road, Clinton didn't hold back.

"I felt like a fish out of water," said Clinton, a county resident involved in the interurban greenways project. "There's no place for a pedestrian to walk here."

Clinton was one of several county residents and officials invited to participate in a walkable community workshop March 3 presented by The National Center for Bicycling and Walking. The workshop was made possible through a grant provided by Kentuckiana Regional Planning and Development Agency, applied for by Oldham County Judge-Executive Mary Ellen Kinser and Planning and Zoning Director Louise Allen.

Participants studied the intersection of Ky. 393 and Ky. 146 during the workshop, walking the area and then mapping out ideas to make it more pedestrian friendly.

Kinser said at the beginning of the workshop that making Oldham County a walkable community is important to the county's vitality and to residents' health.

"Oldham County has become very automobile dependent," she said. "And in order to get around just from the high school to Wendell Moore park, the safest thing to do is to get in the car and drive it. ... Walking it would be very easy if there was a way to do so."

Kinser said making a community walkable is also a health issue, as many people do not have the means in their communities to carry out a healthy lifestyle through walking.

"Prominence of cars, videos and computer games and leisure activity has increased lifestyle problems for every American," Kinser said. "An individual must choose to be active. ... But it's much easier to choose to be active if you're given the facilities and the means to do it."

Kinser said the Ky. 393 and Ky. 146 area was chosen because the project had to combine a highway that had been approved and is under design. She said a plan for North Ky. 393 was brought to the table in November,

but it lacked options for walking and effectively driving from the high school and Wendell Moore park to the 55-acre sports park currently being developed. Officials sent that plan back to the drawing board, she said, and the workshop would provide a tool to help develop that plan.

As the workshop began, each participant told the group what his or her vision for the community is -- and as the list began to grow, ideas of greenways, walkability, linking parks to neighborhoods and healthier lifestyles were brought forth.

Mark Fenton, a consultant with The National Center for Biking and Walking and a planning and zoning commission member in his hometown near Boston, Mass., talked with the group about the plan for making a community walkable. He said a lack of pedestrian options causes higher health risks for certain diseases for members of the community because sedentary lifestyle is encouraged. He said communities have to act now to enhance the lives of their residents and also economic development in the area.

"I challenge you, is that what we are by system, by habit, building in Oldham County?" Fenton said. "What are we going to do about it?"

Fenton said there are five elements important in creating a vision -- networking, land use decisions, safety, functional details of destination site and a civic commitment from the community.

To provide a solid network in the area, Fenton said sidewalks should be required on every street, with a 5-foot minimum. He stressed the importance of complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act in angled drives and curb ramps. He also suggested improving connections with a transit system and trails and greenways, as well as creating spur trails that go through neighborhoods to reach industrial areas.

Land-use decisions are an important factor in Oldham County, Fenton said. Smart growth is important in networking, he said, in that poor growth will encourage driving and will not promote avenues for walking in a community. He gave an example of two communities where children had to get to school -- in one, the only option was to drive around the perimeters of the neighborhood only to get stuck in traffic, while the other provided trails and connectors from subdivisions to schools so students could walk to school easily.

"Destinations have to be close enough together," Fenton said. "You've gotta get there. It's time as a county to do this. To not act is to make a decision. You guys have to know it's a decision to not do anything."

Fenton encouraged the group to look at how pedestrian access could promote economic activity, as well as changing planning and zoning bylaws to allow more pedestrian-friendly environments.

After Fenton's presentation, participants split into two groups to tour the Ky. 393 and Ky.

146 area. Walking through the mud and rain at around 3:15 p.m. offered insight into how school traffic operates and what could be done to alleviate congestion and provide safe walking and bicycling options.

Kinser said the North Ky. 393 proposal brought forth in November did not provide pedestrian access for those traveling from the schools to the sports park, and also made driving difficult.

"To get to the sports park, people had to shift from the old road to the new road to the school parking lot to the access road," Kinser said. "There was no pedestrian access. ... It's very sad that you have to drive to the sports field to get to the sports field."

After returning from their walk, participants returned to map out options for making the 393 area more walkable. Several groups drew plans that connected interurban greenways to surrounding schools, sports parks and subdivisions by connecting trails, as well as providing pedestrian signs, sidewalks, taking out guardrails and providing shared parking. The installation of a roundabout on 393 to provide safer pedestrian crossings was discussed, as well as encouraging the development of a shopping district near the schools that provided grassroots stores and unique development.

Judy Hall, who is also involved in the greenway project in Oldham County, asserted to the group that county officials must act now to achieve this vision for the community.

"If you don't think about it now, things will get in the way," Hall said. "This is the time we should be looking at these things. It's the big picture."

Kinser said she would like to hear community input on some of the plans created by participants. She said officials have the opportunity now to put something on paper and gauge public opinion about such a project.

Fenton told the group they must put forth the effort now.

"It's going to be paramount for every one of you to be the vocal point for this plan," Fenton said. "You guys are going to have to be the sales people."