

February 18, 2010

Extreme makeover

Northville, Plymouth plan major downtown work

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Editor

What do electric cars and Victorian-era architecture have in common?

They could soon work hand-in-hand in downtown Northville. Including charging stations to service electric cars is one of the changes proposed through the upcoming streetscape redevelopment project, which will get under way this year.

"It's exciting," said Carolann Ayers, a member of the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) board and former mayor-pro-tem. "We have so many automotive people in town that they're going to be using some of those cars."

Big changes

The City of Northville and the City of Plymouth are both planning major work in the downtown area this year, despite the soft economy. Both projects will cost about \$2 million-with Northville's being funded through two fiscal years. The cities will sell bonds for the work that the DDA will repay.

In Northville, the project required a final round of changes before it could go to the city council for approval.

"We're making progress," said Lori Ward, director of the Northville DDA.

The changes centered around Mary Alexander Court, after an initial concept drew criticism from the merchants there. The additional plan showed changing the street into a two-way street and reduced some of the parking. That has since been changed, said Bob Doyle of JJR, Inc, the firm designing the streetscape project.

The street will continue to be a one-way thoroughfare and, by moving the dumpsters and changing the angles on the parking spots, the downtown will see a net increase of four additional spaces, he said.

"The DDA listened to the merchants," said Ward. "It looks like we've addressed everything they talked about."

The concept will go to the city council on March 1. If it wins approval there, bids will go out shortly after that. The project, which includes freshening up the streetscape-the brick pavers, sidewalks and other features-on Main and Center streets is the first major change in the overall streetscape since it was put in place more than 30 years ago.

The opportunity to put in charging stations for electric cars came through discussions with DTE Energy, said John Casey, a DDA member in charge of that subcommittee. He said the energy company would provide grants to pay for it. The city would pay for the electricity needed, but an electric car can be recharged in two hours at a cost of 22 cents.

Both the city and the energy company would get plenty of promotions from it. Michigan is one of three states where electric cars will be heavily promoted, according to Casey.

"We're going to be the first city in Michigan to have this," said City Manager Pat Sullivan.

The city could get some additional help to fund the project and put in additional features, too. A \$665,000 Transportation Enhancement Grant is pending; the city was notified that they had received the funds, but they have not been allocated by the state yet because the federal transportation bill they are attached to had not yet received final approval.

The City of Plymouth is on the cusp of a \$2 million makeover, too, according to DDA Director Tony Bruscato. He said the changes will take three summers to complete, since workers have to schedule projects around the city's busy event season.

The first phase, he said, will include the repaving of Main Street from Penniman to Ann Arbor Trail and Ann Arbor Trail from Union to Forest. Crosswalk improvements are included in that, as are new mast arms that will be erected at Main and Ann Arbor Trail for the streetlights.

Preliminary work is set to begin next month, he added. The city has scheduled three informational meetings to let merchants and residents know what to expect during construction; the first one takes place at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 24 at the Plymouth Cultural Center.

Other changes planned

The streetscape project in Downtown Northville will be the largest project going on this year, but officials hope to pull off another, too.

They have narrowed down the concepts of a proposed pedestrian cut-through from the parking lot behind the Marquis Theater to Main Street to two possibilities, said Ward.

The project would provide access through the Comerica Bank building next to the theater; it would be the only pedestrian cut-through on that side of town. The other two are on Center Street. The proposals are for a basic, internal hallway that could be completed for less than \$300,000, or a decorative type of alleyway that would be open to the sky that would cost about \$200,000 more.

“Either of these are within the proposed budget for the project,” said Ward.

The concepts have to be approved by the planning commission, the Historic District Commission and the city council.

Sullivan said he would favor the two-story proposal because it could provide a better aesthetic improvement.

“I think, long term, it would be more for your money,” he told the DDA board.

“It’s a lot of money to make it look pretty,” cautioned DDA Member Lou LaChance.

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