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By D.E. Smoot, Phoenix Staff Writer

Bicycle lanes on 2 streets urged

Health and wellness advocates are pushing a plan for a pilot program that would add designated bicycle lanes along two Muskogee streets.

The bicycle lanes initially would be marked along portions of Seventh and 12th streets. If the proposed program wins the approval of city councilors and then proves successful, more lanes could be added.

The idea for the designated bicycle paths was brought to the attention of officials as the city's comprehensive plan was being discussed and debated. Muskogee County Health Department officials hired a transportation planning consultant to study the idea.

Once the study was completed, Doug Walton, the coordinator of the Muskogee County Turning Point Coalition's food and fitness initiative, took the proposal to the citizen advisory committee for street improvements. Administrators plan to present the proposal to the city councilors when the Public Works Committee meets Feb. 5.

Walton said in addition to providing a vehicle for a more active lifestyle, the idea behind a "complete streets" system is to accommodate all forms of transportation: pedestrians, cyclists, vehicles and mass transit. Seventh and 12th streets were selected for the proposed pilot program because they are wider than most and could accommodate more easily the addition of bicycle lanes.

"The notion of complete streets is to look at all transportation users when making street improvements and for new construction," Walton said. "It creates more opportunities for people to be physically active, an area where we kind of lag behind at the city, county and state level. As a result, we have a higher rate of different health problems.

Walton said he envisioned a future network of designated bicycle lanes that connect neighborhoods, schools, shopping districts, and existing and future trail systems.

Mark Bonney, a lawyer who was the chairman of the street committee as the idea developed, said he believes "it is a good idea for Muskogee." He said designated bicycle paths would serve at least two purposes: increase recreational opportunities and provide transportation alternatives.

"I suspect they (the bicycle lanes) will be used, and we will see an increase in the number of bicyclists using the streets for recreation and transportation," said Bonney, whose term on the streets advisory panel expired in December. "I think it would be a wonderful thing for Muskogee and something that will be expanded in the future."

Public Works Director Mike Stewart, who will present the proposal to city councilors, said some issues will have to be overcome if the pilot program wins approval. Among the issues are how to safely designate turn lanes and parking.

"It has maintenance issues, and we want to make sure the council knows about them," he said. "I can see both sides of it, and we will do what is requested."

Walton said he is hopeful the pilot program will be approved and the bicycle lanes marked by springtime.

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