

Woodward to get foot-traffic friendly
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Almost 365 days a year, Brad Daniels rides his bike wherever he wants to go — the grocery store, friends' houses, even to work.

Most of Daniels' daily three-mile commute from his Royal Oak home to American Cycle and Fitness is on quiet tree-lined side streets. But the last three-quarters of a mile takes him down Woodward.

"The Woodward ride is mostly sidewalk because it's the safest, but it's definitely the slowest," said Daniels, 36. "You always have to look for people coming around the corners."

However, getting around Woodward — Michigan's first state highway and a National Scenic Byway — on bike or on foot could become easier in the future.

The Woodward Avenue Action Association (WA3) has commissioned a study to make find ways to make Woodward more pedestrian- and bike-friendly between Eight Mile Road and Maple.

"We were approached by Royal Oak, which is developing a non-motorized master plan, to see what elements would work," said Nicole Klepadlo, WA3 economic development program manager. "We're looking at things like speed limits and other walkability options. It's really the connection between Wayne and Oakland counties and it's an effort to promote regionalism."

"The safest spot on the roadway for bicyclists should be on the side of the road, but 45 mph, which is the speed limit on Woodward north of I-696, is not appropriate for bicyclists," said Scott Clein, an associate at Giffels-Webster, a civil engineering firm that has conducted preliminary studies for WA3's non-motorized plan.

As part of the preliminary studies, Clein noted that there are large stretches between I-696 and 12 Mile where landscaped buffers could be installed between buildings and traffic. However, north of 12 Mile, parking in aisles between the road and the stores makes biking tedious.

"We're looking at sharing that space with bicyclists," Clein said. "Longterm, we could take out a lane."

However, there are cities which have made planning and zoning improvements that encourage pedestrian and bike traffic on and near Woodward.

"We're the only community except Detroit that has a downtown on Woodward," Ferndale DPW Director Byron Photiades said. "Basically, we went back to what Woodward was like in the 1950s."

In the early 1990s, Ferndale eliminated 300 parking spots in the median of Woodward and placed them behind the buildings and installed brick paver sidewalks. In 1998, the city reconstructed Nine Mile Road between Woodward and Planavon by reducing traffic lanes, installing on-street parking, and lowering the speed limit.

The city also installed countdown timers at its crossing signals at Woodward and Nine Mile in 2005 and took advantage of Michigan Department of Transportation enhancement grants to commission benches and sculptures.

Many of Ferndale's restaurants have sidewalk café seating. Landscaping and low-level decorative lighting draw diners and shoppers to its downtown from mid-morning until past midnight. By request of businesses and residents, the city's Downtown Development Authority will be installing bike racks on every block in September.

"We wanted to create an area that was attractive to pedestrians," Photiades said. "People really like that human touch and it's really attracted a diverse population."

Even though Ferndale does not have dedicated bike lanes on Woodward, it does have them on Livernois and Hilton, which run parallel to Woodward. Additional bike routes are posted on residential streets.

The city of Birmingham's Triangle District Urban Design Plan, approved in 2007, is a mixed-use development plan designed to better link its downtown district to the east of Woodward between Lincoln and Maple.

"We want people to make it more walkable and make people want to live, work and play in the area," Birmingham Planning Director Jana Ecker said.

The Triangle District ordinance requires minimum widths for sidewalks, pedestrian-scale lighting, pedestrian entrances from all streets, and it encourages canopies and awnings — no blank walls are permitted. There is a density bonus incentive for developments that provide public plaza spaces.

So far, only 735 Forest, a loft apartment/office/bistro complex has been completed according to the Triangle Urban Design Plan standards. Two other potential developments at the former Barclay Inn on the southeast corner of Woodward and Maple and the former Hamilton Funeral Home on Maple east of Woodward have yet to submit design plans.

Birmingham also made street crossing and landscape improvements at the intersection of Woodward and Maple several years ago.

The stretch of Woodward between 14 Mile Road and Lincoln in Birmingham has a mix of parking lots and angled parking between the sidewalks and the street.

"We make them build to the property line in that area. We don't have a master plan in effect for that area," Ecker said.

In the meantime in Royal Oak, the City Commission selected Active Transportation Alliance to draft its non-motorized master plan at its Aug. 3 meeting. Active Transportation Alliance is a nonprofit organization that has worked to improve conditions for bicycling and walking in the Chicago area.

"They're going to be looking at the entire city," said Royal Oak City Planner Doug Hedges. "It's too early to tell what they'll recommend."

Photiades said he believes the intersection of Woodward and 13 Mile Road has the most potential for non-motorized improvements in Royal Oak.

"There's so much that goes on at Memorial Park, Northwood Shopping Center and Beaumont Hospital," Photiades said. "It's where everyone meets for the Dream Cruise."

WA3 will hold a presentation for interested stakeholders in late September. For more information, visit www.woodwardavenue.org.