

Safe Bicycle and Pedestrian Transport Committee Meeting
March 6, 2026 – 7:31 a.m.

The meeting of the Safe Bicycle and Pedestrian Transport Committee was called to order at 7:31 a.m. on March 6, 2026. Present at the meeting were Councilmember Mary Rensel, Councilmember Chris Bell, Police Chief Mike Rizzo, and citizens John Buda and Phyllis Marino.

At the beginning of the meeting, committee members discussed recent changes to Council membership and how those changes affected the composition of the committee. It was noted that a councilperson had recently resigned, which required adjustments to committee assignments. Ruth Cavanagh will be joining the committee, which will ensure that three council members are assigned. This arrangement will allow the committee to continue meeting even if one council member is unavailable. It was noted that Councilmember Cavanagh was unable to attend this meeting because she was on vacation.

The committee also discussed the role of public voting members. The committee structure allows for two community members to serve as voting members in addition to council representatives. While members of the public are welcome to attend and participate in discussions, two individuals may be formally appointed as voting members. During the meeting, Phyllis Marino expressed interest in serving as a voting member, and John Buda indicated he would consider the position. The committee noted that these appointments would need to be formally approved at a future Council meeting.

The committee then reviewed the status of the proposed multi-use path along Bell Road from State Route 306 to Spring Drive. Council has requested that the county auditor's office prepare an estimate showing what the millage impact would be if the project were placed on the ballot for voter approval. The estimated construction cost of the path is approximately \$1.8 million. Committee members emphasized that Council has not yet decided whether the project will be placed on the ballot, and that obtaining the millage estimate is simply the first step in evaluating the feasibility of asking voters to fund the project.

The committee then turned to grant research and project history, which Councilmember Rensel had been exploring. She began by explaining that there is a significant history of trail planning efforts in the area dating back to 2010, when a community group involving Chagrin Falls, Moreland Hills, and surrounding communities participated in a NOACA-funded study called "All Roads Lead to Chagrin Falls." At that time, South Russell contributed approximately \$15,000 toward the study, which produced data about regional connectivity and the need for safe transportation routes between communities. Rensel noted that this historical information may help the committee better understand previous challenges and opportunities.

She also described a past effort in which the South Russell Foundation attempted to raise private funding for trail development. That initiative was led by Steve Blackowitz, and it aimed to gather philanthropic support for trail construction. Rensel indicated that she intends to research this effort further to understand why it did not ultimately move forward, as understanding past obstacles could help the committee address similar issues today.

Rensel reported that she had spoken with Catherine Garvey from the Safe Routes program, which focuses on projects that allow children to safely walk or bike to school. Through that conversation she learned that children can walk to Gurney Elementary School with a parent present under the program's policies. She indicated that Safe Routes funding could potentially be available for trail segments that connect to the school, although she had not yet obtained detailed funding information.

Rensel also contacted Judd Klein, the Mayor of Orange Village, to learn about how Orange developed its trail system. Klein explained that Orange framed its project around the concept that "all roads lead to Pinecrest," using the Pinecrest development as a central destination to help residents understand the value of a connected trail network. Rensel noted that Orange emphasized that the facilities were trails rather than traditional sidewalks, which helped residents visualize them as recreational and community amenities. According to Klein, significant community education and outreach were necessary so residents could understand where trails would go and how they would function.

Klein also described how Orange addressed the financial challenges of trail construction and maintenance. The community ultimately secured \$5 million in funding from the developer of Pinecrest, which provided substantial financial support for the trail system. In addition, Orange established a permanent maintenance levy to cover ongoing costs such as snow removal and upkeep. Rensel noted that Klein emphasized that funding was the largest obstacle their community faced, but once financing was secured, many of the other challenges became easier to address.

Committee members discussed the physical characteristics of the Orange trails, noting that they are wide asphalt paths located off the roadway rather than narrow sidewalks. They are designed to follow natural curves and blend with the surrounding environment rather than running straight along the road.

Rensel then outlined several grant opportunities she had researched. She spoke with Mr. Hammonds from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, who provided information about the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) and the Clean Ohio Trail Fund (COTF). These grants could potentially support trail construction, but they are competitive and have strict timing requirements. One important requirement is that any necessary easements must already be secured before applying. The application cycle occurs annually, with submissions due in March. Because the current application deadline is imminent, the committee acknowledged that it would not be possible to pursue these grants this year.

Another potential funding partner is the Geauga Park Foundation, led by Christina Davidson. The foundation offers both small grants (less than \$5,000) and larger grants to support projects that promote outdoor recreation and nature education. Rensel explained that the foundation has previously supported projects such as the West Woods Trail, a trail in Munson Township, and a trail near University Hospitals Geauga Medical Center. Davidson indicated that the foundation prefers to know well in advance if a community intends to apply so they can begin fundraising for the project.

Rensel also mentioned Ed Krause from the City of Solon, who has experience assembling funding from multiple Rails-to-Trails grants. She had not yet spoken with him but noted that he had expressed willingness to discuss Solon's experiences with trail development.

As part of her research, Rensel reviewed the results of a South Russell resident survey that had been conducted in the past. The survey included responses from 333 residents, representing approximately eight percent of the population. Although the response rate was relatively small, the results suggested that residents' primary priorities were connecting trails to the school and to the park, improving safety, and preserving the village's rural character. Many respondents indicated that they currently avoid walking or biking along Bell Road because of safety concerns.

The committee also discussed easements along Bell Road, which may be required for the proposed path. Rensel reported that some documentation suggested property owners on the north side of Bell Road had been contacted in the past, but it was unclear whether property owners on the south side had been contacted. Determining the current status of these easements will be an important step before pursuing certain grants.

Another idea raised during the discussion was the possibility of constructing a demonstration trail segment within the village park. According to previous notes, the Western Reserve Land Conservancy had indicated that installing a path along the front of the park could be acceptable. Committee members suggested that building a short demonstration path could help residents visualize what the proposed trail might look like and allow the community to evaluate design options before committing to a larger project.

Members discussed possible materials for such a demonstration trail, including asphalt, gravel, crushed limestone, and permeable pavers. Some participants expressed concern about paving in a natural park environment and noted that gravel or permeable surfaces might be more environmentally friendly. Others pointed out that a solid surface could be more accessible for strollers, bicycles, and mobility devices. One suggestion was to begin with a compacted base that could later be paved if desired.

The committee also discussed additional project partners and allies who might support the initiative, including bicycle clubs, community organizations, and agencies focused on aging populations that may benefit from safer walking routes.

The conversation then shifted to a concept known as a "road diet." This strategy involves narrowing travel lanes within legal standards, which research suggests can slow traffic and reduce accidents. One idea discussed at a recent Streets Committee meeting involved restriping Bell Road to create two bicycle lanes by shifting or narrowing existing lanes. Preliminary measurements indicated that approximately eight feet of additional space could potentially be created, which could allow for a five-foot path and a three-foot buffer.

Police Chief Mike Rizzo provided feedback on traffic safety issues. He noted that one of the committee's original goals was to keep children off the roadway, and placing bike lanes directly on the road might not fully address that objective. However, he acknowledged that restriping could be a relatively inexpensive option if it improved safety.

Chief Rizzo also discussed the possibility of lowering speed limits on Bell Road and State Route 306. He explained that the village has budgeted approximately \$12,000 for a speed study on State Route 306, which would be conducted by the Ohio Department of Transportation. The study would determine what speed limit is appropriate based on traffic conditions. However, he cautioned that such studies can occasionally result in recommendations to increase speed limits, which could be counterproductive.

He further explained that Bell Road's speed limit is established by village ordinance, meaning that any change would likely require both a traffic study and legal review by the village solicitor.

In discussing traffic safety data, Chief Rizzo noted that South Russell has an excellent safety record. The village has received the AAA Platinum Award for Traffic and Pedestrian Safety for four consecutive years, and pedestrian or bicycle accidents occur very rarely. He estimated that bicycle-related accidents occur perhaps once every eight to ten years, and overall crash rates in the village are among the lowest in the region.

Rizzo also described the village's use of speed-monitoring boxes, which display drivers' speeds and collect traffic data. These devices are placed strategically throughout the village and are considered traffic-calming tools. The average recorded speed on Bell Road is approximately 37 miles per hour, which is close to the posted speed limit. Each device costs roughly \$3,500 and is solar powered and cloud connected, allowing police to access traffic data remotely. Rizzo stated that he would like to eventually place one of these devices in every neighborhood and suggested installing an additional unit near the park to slow traffic approaching that area. Committee members expressed strong support for the idea.

The committee also discussed public education efforts related to pedestrian safety. Chief Rizzo indicated that the police department could contribute articles to the village newsletter or create informational materials reminding residents about safe pedestrian practices and proper use of crosswalks. He noted that many pedestrians using the park crosswalk do not press the crossing button, which activates warning signals for drivers. In response, the department recently repositioned signage to make instructions more visible to pedestrians approaching the crosswalk.

Rizzo also explained that the village has camera systems monitoring key intersections and the park area. Cameras installed near the park restroom building monitor the playground, parking lot, and crosswalk. Additional cameras at the main intersection allow officers to zoom in on the school zone or intersection when needed and store about one month of recorded footage, which can be used in the event of an accident investigation.

Toward the end of the discussion, committee members returned briefly to the topic of trail maintenance costs. John Buda asked whether other communities had provided information about the ongoing expenses associated with trail systems, noting that it would be helpful for South Russell to gather those figures as planning continues.

The meeting concluded after members shared final questions and observations about the topics discussed.