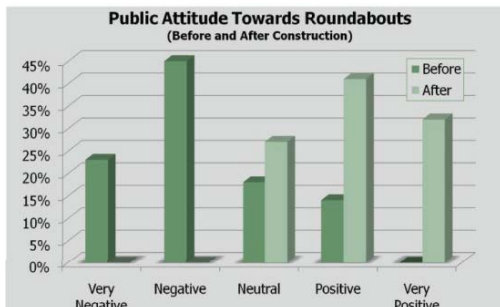


Published July 26th, 2017

Roundabouts take shape on St. Mary's Road

By *Sophie Braccini*

FHWA statistics on roundabouts. Provided

The town of Moraga received a grant last year to pay for a study to design roundabouts on St. Mary's Road. The topic was the safety of two intersections: Bollinger Canyon and Rheem Boulevard. The idea has been on the desk of the public works department since January of 2008, with the recommendation of constructing one or two roundabouts. It became an objective of the town last year to get the project "shovel-ready" for when grant money comes in.

Kwan hired Kimley Horn and Associates, a firm with extensive roundabout construction experience. A presentation was given on July 20 in the town's offices.

Kwan reminded the rather large audience that the two intersections were characterized with insufficient stopping sight distance and had visibility issues. He said that the project's first objective was to improve the safety for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles. Other goals included minimizing the impact to open space, curtailing construction costs, and maintaining the rural character of the surrounds areas. The Moraga Town Council asked the consultant to consider all possibilities for these two intersections.

The consultants explained that they had considered different alternatives: at the Rheem Boulevard intersection either a roundabout or a traffic signal, and at the Bollinger Canyon Road intersection, a full size roundabout, a mini-roundabout or a three-way stop.

According to the consultants and the data they collected, a roundabout at Rheem and a mini-roundabout at Bollinger are the best options in terms of traffic calming, safety, traffic flow, and cost.

Some residents that had come to the meeting were nonetheless very critical of the concept. Several people asked why the town would spend time and money on "bells and whistles" when it had a fiscal emergency on its hands.

Kwan explained that no money from the general fund would ever go to this project and that it would remain unfunded until it could be financed by grants. He added that in spite of the financial emergency, residents deserved the best safety possible.

A number of residents voiced their skepticism toward the small roundabout proposed at the intersection at Bollinger, located on a slope in a blind curve. Sean Houck, from Kimley-Horn and Associates, who has conceived over one hundred roundabouts, talked about several designed with similar topographic constraints that were very efficient.

One person also noted that only to neighbors of the intersections (including the entire Bluffs) were notified of the meeting and that it would impact the whole town. Kwan responded that more public meetings would be held to discuss the project.

Several Bluffs residents expressed their appreciation in very emotional terms that the town was taking their concerns into consideration. Some said that they had to go through the most dangerous intersection in town, aware of the fact that it was a big risk every time. Others noted that they were hearing emergency response vehicles coming to the intersection every other week.

Some residents noted that no formal crossing had been planned for pedestrians at the intersections and asked that it be added.

Roundabouts are some of the most misunderstood features on the road today.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, before a roundabout is constructed about 65 percent of the people affected have a negative perception of the road feature, but after construction 75 percent of the same users have a positive viewpoint regarding roundabouts.

When Moraga Director of Public works Edric Kwan presented the first version of what two new roundabouts would look like on St. Mary's Road, he certainly had to face expected skepticism from many residents, though several Moragans who live in the Bluffs voiced their support of something they see as a possible solution for a very dangerous intersection.

Kwan concluded the meeting saying that residents' comments would be taken into consideration and that a final project would be submitted during a public session in the coming months. More information is available on the project website at www.moraga.ca.us/roundabouts.



Roundabout design on St. Mary's Road. Image provided

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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