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Reliez Valley Road sees immediate measures on safety

By Pippa Fisher



The public works department creates a new stop sign Nov. 17 on Reliez Valley Road. Photo Pippa Fisher

Lafayette is moving fast to address the safety issue on Reliez Valley Road with the immediate implementation of two new stop signs, a new crosswalk, painted speed reminders on the pavement and, at the Pleasant Hill intersection, a "No Right Turn" sign.

But does addressing the issue of safety come at the expense of the issue of congestion? Will some of the measures such as two extra stops add time to the drive along the corridor and add to driver frustration during peak hours? These issues were once again before the city council at its Nov. 13 meeting.

Lafayette Chief of Police Eric Christensen gave the five measures for addressing the issue of safety as his recommendation to the council following two weeks of directed police enforcement along Reliez Valley Road.

With police handing out a steady flow of speeding tickets during this time, some for speeds as high as 65 mph, it

became very apparent that certain stretches of the road pose a real danger.

Over 16 local residents including several students got up to speak - many in favor of the stop signs, while others foresaw increased congestion as a result. All other measures were supported. The students in particular spoke of long commutes from the north end of Reliez Valley Road.

Concerned residents have formed the group Reliez Valley Residents for Reduced Traffic demanding No Turn and No Thru signs at various locations on Grayson Road, Withers Avenue and Taylor Boulevard aimed at stopping the WAZE app from sending thru traffic along the corridor.

Kristen Altbaum, a Reliez Valley resident, says she supports stop signs and anything that facilitates more safety along the road, but emphasizes that she wishes the city and county supported efforts at mitigating congestion prior to adding more stop signs.

"School commutes have grown considerably over the last few years because out-of-area commuters are flooding Reliez as a 'shortcut' to Hwy 24 and an alternative to traveling south on Taylor or Hwy 680," says Altbaum, referring to the WAZE app that directs drivers along the residential road. "A two-minute saving for these out of area drivers costs residents an extra 20-30 minutes on many days. School tardies are at an all time high and (school) buses keep adjusting their pickup times earlier and earlier."

Council Member Cam Burks, who has been spearheading the push for immediate safety measures, called for the council to be "nimble," saying it should "take interim steps while the circulation committee meets to come up with a holistic plan."

Vice Mayor Don Tatzin agreed and was keen to have the results come back to the council in three months as well as maintaining continued enforcement. With Mayor Mike Anderson of like mind, the only council member to voice concern about the proposed measures was Ivor Samson, saying that he found it hard to divorce safety from congestion. Samson feared additional stop signs would bunch up traffic and said he would also like to see electronic speed feedback signs and speed cushions or speed bumps.

However in the end, Samson made the vote unanimous, 4-0 (with Council Member Mark Mitchell absent) to start the implementation of all five recommendations, with the added wording that police enforcement should continue for the foreseeable future and that the stop signs' effects are studied with the results brought back to the council in three months.

As far as safety goes, in the first week following the installation of the new stop signs Christensen says that his officers have reported the sign at Fairholm Court is having the desired effect, slowing the traffic down along that portion of the roadway. "While I am sure the enforcement has also had some effect in the area, we were still getting people speeding along the route before the signs - now they can't get anyone in that area."

"We are still collecting data from the area which will show us how the driver behaviors have changed," says Christensen, "but I think preliminarily, it is safe to say the signs are doing exactly what was expected."

As for how the controversial stop signs will affect congestion, time will tell.

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