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Traffic dangers for students near schools

By Pippa Fisher



Charlene Fernandes helps students across busy Pleasant Hill Road by Springhill School. Photo Pippa Fisher

funding to study potential Safe Routes to School solutions.

It was not an evening during which action would be taken, but the special joint meeting of the Lafayette City Council and the Lafayette School District board was nonetheless a good opportunity for dialog between the two bodies. And traffic was front and center once again.

In fact two of the items on the agenda related to Lafayette's traffic woes. Transportation Planner James Hinkamp gave a report at the April 30 meeting on the downtown congestion plan and also gave a report summarizing issues and mitigation measures at the schools within the LAFSD.

Hinkamp went through the schools one by one, starting with Burton Valley Elementary School, which he said is the least impacted by traffic and congestion, but which however has identified "active transportation," meaning students bicycling and walking to and from school, as the main safety concern. He said that school staff supervision as well as high visibility markers have helped, and talked about the possibility of seeking grant

Happy Valley Elementary School, said Hinkamp, does have significant traffic congestion around morning drop-off and afternoon pickup times. He said that school staff supervision, led by the principal, coupled with double or side-by-side loading and periodic police traffic enforcement of noncompliant driver behavior has made a difference. Consideration is being given to comments from traffic engineering consulting firm Arup regarding other ideas such as modifying curbs, removing off-street parking, installing additional pavement marking and improving sidewalks to facilitate pedestrian access to and from the public right of way.

Regarding Lafayette Elementary School and Stanley Middle School, Hinkamp said that their position in downtown means that traffic congestion is a huge issue. In both cases the downtown congestion plan has potential solutions as part of the long- and short-term fixes such as the Brook Street realignment. Additionally he pointed to the recently implemented mitigation measures such as the all-direction "scramble" lights on Moraga Road and the improved shared path on First Street.

Perhaps the school with the biggest traffic congestion issues and active transportation safety concerns, however, is Springhill Elementary. The congestion issue here is complex, Hinkamp explained, as the school sits on Pleasant Hill Road - the busiest roadway in Lafayette - and is impacted by congestion also on Reliez Valley Road. The faster speed limit of the road - 35 miles per hour - makes pedestrian safety a concern.

Hinkamp said that the school has implemented the use of crossing guards and done some capital improvements to enhance walkways on Quandt Road, along with adjusting signal timing on Pleasant Hill Road, which he said has improved it modestly.

Springhill School crossing guard Charlene Fernandes, who has been crossing students at the Pleasant Hill Road/Quandt Road intersection for 15 years, notes that the traffic is much worse now than it has ever been. "People run red lights all the time. I've definitely had some close calls," she says.

Addressing the Reliez Valley Road congestion, Hinkamp said that the city continues to work with the county to test turn restriction signs and that they hope to have the parameters in place for a trial to begin in July which would continue into the next school year.

Both school board members and the council asked questions and made comments.

School Board Member David Gerson made the point that with the wide streets in the Burton Valley neighborhood, creating bike lanes would seem like an easy and inexpensive solution. Vice Mayor Cam Burks echoed his concern with safety of the cyclists and asked about Safe Routes to School solutions.

Several spoke of the need for further exploration on funding and implementation of Safe Routes to School solutions and Council Member Mike Anderson suggested coordination between the school district and city in obtaining funding.

For Burks, he says that the council working actively with LAFSD is very important. "I wanted to see greater collaboration between our two bodies. I think tonight represented very positive movement in this regard."

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