

San Rafael reworks plans for dangerous intersection

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Third and Hetherton streets in San Rafael is getting an overhaul to improve safety. (Robert Tong/Marin Independent Journal/2016)

San Rafael officials have revised pedestrian safety plans at Third and Hetherton streets, where there have been two pedestrian fatalities and several injury accidents narrowly averted.

Earlier this month, the City Council voted 4-1, with Councilman John Gamblin dissenting, to OK a refined version of the project after hearing concerns that a previously approved plan to eliminate one of two left-turn lanes would make gridlock worse.

Kevin Hagerty, of the citizens advocacy group Point San Pedro Road Coalition, said the group was supportive of the revisions and “appreciative of the city’s willingness to reevaluate its earlier recommendation.”

“The coalition believes that the current recommended solution greatly enhances the safety of pedestrians who use that intersection,” he said, “and at the same time, addresses concerns by many of the Point San Pedro peninsula residents that the old solution would cause further delays ...”

The revised project calls for the removal of a crosswalk at the south end of the intersection and the addition of a north-south crosswalk to the eastern leg. The project would keep both left-turn pockets from westbound Third Street onto Hetherton Street.

At the Dec. 17 council meeting, Gamblin said he thought it would be a better use of time and money to block the pedestrian access across Third Street at the eastern leg of the intersection rather than to

create a new crosswalk. He said a barricade there would train pedestrians to turn around and seek an alternate route.

But staff, council members and residents were concerned that not everyone would follow the rule, cross anyway and cause traffic and safety hazards.

Councilman Andrew McCullough said that a majority of pedestrians who use the crosswalks there are high school students, “so they are teenagers who may not have the judgment or maturity to do what you think they should do.”

McCullough said, “I think we should look at this carefully ... we need to be mindful we have young people here whose wellbeing we need to look out for.”

In July, the City Council voted unanimously to accept recommendations from a traffic study to eliminate one of the two left-turn lanes at the intersection where there were pedestrian fatalities in 2014 and 2016. Both fatal collisions at the congested intersection involved vehicles making a westbound left turn from Third Street to southbound Hetherton Street from the second turning lane.

Since that time, the city has added accessible curb ramps, technology that gives pedestrians lead time before cars can enter the intersection, and high visibility crosswalk striping. Crews also have removed several trees that shaded the southeast corner and resurfaced and restriped Hetherton Street to improve safety, according to a staff report. During peak hours, the intersection handles more than 3,500 vehicles and 200 pedestrians per hour, the report said.

The study presented in July was prepared by Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc., a planning and design engineering firm that has also studied options for relocating the Bettini Transit Center just west of the intersection.

Taking out one of the left-turn lanes was supposed to be a one-year pilot project. Rafat Raie, deputy public works director, said if the pilot is unsuccessful it would be difficult to revert the turn lane back to its previous condition because drivers and pedestrians would have adapted to the new configuration.

Public works staff is now working to finalize the design of the revised project approved Dec. 17 to go out to bid next fall. Because the intersection falls under Caltrans’ jurisdiction, the agency will have to approve the project before improvements can be made.

The new project would also add signal visibility improvements, pedestrian bulb-outs, barricades at the crosswalk and new lighting. Raie said the combination of these projects would offer the city the best long-term solution.

Mayor Gary Phillips said he believes this is the best solution, adding that “it’s made sense to me since day one.”

The project will be financed with a \$580,000 traffic safety improvement grant from Caltrans.