

East San Rafael residents sound off on speed limit hike

By Stephanie Weldy, Marin Independent Journal

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San Rafael residents packed San Pedro Elementary School's auditorium this week to try to better understand a complex proposal to raise the speed limit along busy Point San Pedro Road.

The speed limit, currently 35 miles per hour, could rise to 40 miles per hour in an effort to make the road safer, authorities said at a community meeting Wednesday hosted by city and county officials and the Point San Pedro Road Coalition.

It's a concept that despite explanations from law enforcement, doesn't quite add up for many residents who live in the area and who've grown fearful as cars regularly race down the road. The community for years has rallied for more safety measures. The call has been renewed since 17-year-old jogger Aura Celeste Machado was struck and killed in June when she stepped into the busy road to avoid a downed tree.

"I can't drive 40 on that and feel safe," said Angela Remedios, who lives in the area. "And then I have to make an immediate left after a curb to get to my street and people are barreling down behind."

Councilman Andrew McCullough, who attended the meeting — along with other city and county officials, including Supervisor Damon Connolly — said Thursday that after hearing residents' comments, the city may postpone the speed increase set for Jan. 1 as they look into potential traffic calming measures that could reduce speeds. But the reality is that speed cannot be enforced unless the limit is increased, city officials explained.

Survey needed

The city's current traffic survey for Point San Pedro Road — which falls under both the city and county jurisdiction — expired in 2011. Speed on the portion of roadway in city jurisdiction cannot be enforced without an updated survey. The survey, however, dictates that speed limits are based on the speed of the 85th percentile of those who travel the roadway, said Leslie Blomquist, associate civil engineer for the city. That percentile, said to be the average safe driver, shows that at Point San Pedro Road the speed limit shouldn't be posted at 35 miles per hour, Blomquist said.

"That's telling us we have to post it at 40 miles per hour," she said.

The county can enforce the current 35 miles per hour limit on its portion of the road, but the plan is to have a consistent speed limit along the entire roadway, said Bob Goralka, county principal civil engineer.

According to city officials, from Marina Way to Porto Bello Drive, the 85th percentile travels about 46 miles per hour. That percentile clocks in at an average 42-45 miles per hour from Bay Way to Bayview Drive, and 44-47 miles per hour from Main to Biscayne drives, city officials said.

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If traffic officers were to enforce the speed limit at 35 miles per hour, it would be deemed a speed trap, according to San Rafael police Capt. Glenn McElderry.

“So it’s kind of a Catch-22,” McElderry said. “You want enforcement, we’ve got to raise the speed limit. If we don’t raise the speed limit, you don’t get enforcement.”

Speed bumps

Hope Love, 17, was the youngest community member who went to the meeting to learn the logic behind increasing speed. The San Rafael High School senior climbed on top a bench of an auditorium lunch table when she explained to audience members why she was there. Love said she’s concerned about accelerated speed on the roadway where her friend, Machado, was jogging near Manderly Road.

“I heard they were increasing the speed limit and I was like, ‘Wait, there have been several deaths related to speeding. Why would they want to make it faster?’” Love said.

Love said she’s certain speed bumps installed along the stretch of road would slow motorists down: “People won’t be willing to stop for another human being to save their life, but they will be willing to protect their own money they invest in their vehicle.”

The concept was one echoed by multiple residents, with some saying they’d like to see traffic calming measures put in place without an increased speed limit. Others said the increased speed should be coupled with traffic calming components.

“I get the whole increasing it,” Remedios said. “It’s not so much the increase, I think 40 should be safe, but there should be other safety measures — traffic calming, flashing lights at crosswalks.”

Enforcement

Asked if they’d prefer enforcement with the increased speed at the beginning of 2016, or if they’d like to hold off on enforcement and increased speed, so traffic calming can be studied, the majority chose the latter. City staff is looking into options, Blomquist said.

McCullough said he was disappointed to hear residents were uncomfortable moving forward with enforcement sooner rather than later. But he has to respect their opinion, he said.

“We’ve waited four years on this — there’s been a four-year hiatus,” he said. “If we wait a few months it might be time well spent.”

The city is ready to meet the Jan. 1 deadline if it’s to be enforced, Blomquist said. The matter is not required to go before the City Council for approval, but council members will inform city staff if they approve of the process, she said.

The situation is by no means an easy one, she said.

“It’s very counter-intuitive to think that by raising the speed limit you might be able to reduce the number of speeders with enforcement,” Blomquist said. “And that’s difficult to understand.”

Stephanie Weldy covers San Rafael and Novato news for the Marin IJ. Follow Stephanie on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/StephanieWeldy1>.

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