



AGENDA ITEM

Item Number:

11

TO: CITY COUNCIL

FROM: CITY MANAGER 

Submitted By:

Dominic Lazzaretto 
City Manager

Meeting Date:

December 7, 2010

Subject: Update on Crescent Avenue and Watson Street Intersection Analysis

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the City Council receive and file the Update on Crescent Avenue and Watson Street Intersection Analysis.

SUMMARY:

On November 1, 2010, Sydney Ramirez, a student at John F. Kennedy High School, was struck by a vehicle while walking through the crosswalk at the intersection of Crescent Avenue and Watson Street. Sydney passed away three days later from her injuries.

At the November 16, 2010, City Council Meeting, 26 people addressed the City Council during the Public Comment period to ask that modifications be made to the Crescent Avenue and Watson Street intersection to improve safety there. At the conclusion of the Public Comment period, the City Council directed the City Manager to add an item to the December 7, 2010, City Council Meeting in order to receive an update on the incident as well as the traffic study that is being conducted for the intersection.

BACKGROUND:

Historical Context

The crosswalk at the intersection of Crescent Avenue and Watson Street has been in place for over 30 years. There are no City records of exactly when it was installed; however, the City's oldest historical aerial photographs (taken around 1980) show the crosswalk. In fact, staff at the City of Cypress has indicated that their aerial photographs from the 1960's show the crosswalk.

In the 10 years prior to this accident, there were two pedestrian accidents at the intersection. Both occurred on the Cypress side of the intersection. One was a non-injury accident in which a pedestrian student was clipped by a side view mirror of a vehicle while in the crosswalk. The other occurred on the west side of the intersection, where a pedestrian attempted to cross the street outside of the crosswalk. Minor injuries were reported. In the same time frame, there were 15 reported vehicle collisions at the intersection, mostly involving rear-end collisions of vehicles attempting to make turns onto Watson Street from Crescent Avenue. Two of these involved rear-end collisions of vehicles stopped for pedestrians in the crosswalk.

In 2008, the City received a request from Ms. Angela Martinez to install traffic signal improvements at the intersection of Crescent Avenue and Watson Street. This is the first known complaint about the subject intersection that the City's traffic engineer had received. In response, the City upgraded the crosswalk from two white lines to a bright yellow crosswalk with cross striping in order to improve visibility there.

In November 2009, Ms. Martinez again contacted the City to request further improvements. The City Engineer conducted traffic counts and assessed the intersection. At its meeting on January 25, 2010, based on staff's recommendation and concurrence from the City of Cypress' traffic engineer, the Traffic Safety Committee recommended: (1) that the crosswalk be restriped in thermoplastic to prevent rapid fading, (2) that a pedestrian ramp be installed at the north end of the crosswalk for ADA compliance, and (3) that a grant application for the installation of in-road warning lights be submitted through the Safe Routes to School program administered by Caltrans. At its meeting on February 16, 2010, the City Council approved the Traffic Safety Committee's recommendation. In March, the thermoplastic striping was applied on the crosswalk and the pedestrian ramp was installed. The City also replaced the two pedestrian crossing signs with high-intensity yellow signs and trimmed the trees in advance of the signs shortly thereafter.

At its meeting on July 6, 2010, the City Council approved the submittal of the Safe Routes to School application to Caltrans. Unfortunately, the City was informed recently by Caltrans that the grant application was not approved. Prior to this incident, it was staff's intent to resubmit the application in the next round of funding, as it often takes several attempts to obtain approval due the limited funds available in each cycle.

On October 18, 2010, a Cypress Police Officer reported to the La Palma Police Department that they had received a complaint from a resident about pedestrian safety at the intersection in the morning hours. The information was listed on the police "Project Safe Streets" board in the Police Briefing Room, which directs officers to increase enforcement and patrols in targeted areas.

Incident Summary

On the morning of November 1, 2010, the City's Motorcycle Officer was parked at the south curb of Crescent Avenue monitoring the crosswalk and intersection for speeding violations, vehicles failing to yield to pedestrians and pedestrians crossing unsafely. It was prior to the

time change for the end of Daylight Savings Time. As a result, it was still dark outside when, at 6:45 a.m., a vehicle travelling west on Crescent Avenue struck Sydney Ramirez as she was walking to school, north across Crescent Avenue in the marked crosswalk. The officer witnessed the accident and was with Sydney within seconds. Sydney died at the hospital three days later as a result of her injuries.

The driver of the vehicle is a 55 year old elementary school teacher. She lives in Buena Park and drives Crescent Avenue to work. According to the driver's statements, she was aware the crosswalk was there but she did not see Sydney before the collision. The case has been submitted to the Orange County District Attorney and they have filed charges of Manslaughter against the driver. This charge carries a maximum sentence of imprisonment in the county jail for not more than one year.

Initial Response

In response to this incident, the Cities of Cypress and La Palma have assigned a crossing guard to the crosswalk for the morning and afternoon school crossing times, including "Zero Period." Police officers from both La Palma and Cypress have continued to maintain a high visibility presence at the intersection to monitor and enforce traffic laws there.

In addition, the Cities have jointly contracted with Hartzog & Crabill, Inc. to perform an independent assessment of the intersection. Based in Tustin, Hartzog & Crabill is a traffic engineering firm that has done work throughout Southern California – including working in both Cypress and La Palma. The study will evaluate existing conditions and provide recommendations for the intersection. Options that will be evaluated include:

1. Removing the uncontrolled marked crosswalk and signage across Crescent Avenue and directing pedestrian traffic to the signalized intersection at Crescent Avenue and Walker Street.
2. Enhancing the uncontrolled marked crosswalk with in-roadway warning lights and/or flashing yellow beacons.
3. Installing a traffic signal at the intersection.

The scope of work for the study includes the following:

1. Collect intersection turning movement vehicular and pedestrian counts at the intersection during the morning and afternoon peak periods when pedestrians are most likely to be crossing. A total of eight (8) hours on a typical weekday will be provided in this data collection. Suggested hours are 6:00 a.m. – 9:00a.m. and 2:00 p.m. – 7:00.p.m.
2. Collect average daily traffic (ADT) count data at the intersection during a typical weekday period.

3. Collect and review the available collision data at the intersection during the most recent (5) year reporting period.
4. Prepare an evaluation and recommendations report using the California Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices and collected data as well as other possible warning or regulatory devices, such as in-roadway warning lights, flashing yellow beacons, and traffic signalization.

Hartzog & Crabill are expected to deliver the traffic study to the Cities by December 3, 2010. Once complete, the two Cities will consider the study and recommendations using their standard traffic safety protocols. In La Palma, that process would include an internal review by City staff followed by a recommendation by the Traffic Safety Committee and then a decision by the City Council. It is our understanding that the process in Cypress is very similar.

At this time, the two Cities are exploring alternatives to expediting the processes, including the possibility of holding joint meetings. In addition to these standard protocols, the Cities have agreed to meet with a Subcommittee of the John F. Kennedy High School Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) as soon as the study is released. The PTSA Subcommittee was established to ensure that the school and its parents are involved in the discussions.

Next Steps

While engineering solutions can increase safety, nothing can completely eliminate all risks at an intersection. Therefore, public education will be an important part of the long-term response plan.

The Police Department has already added a segment on pedestrian safety and use of crosswalks into the Police Interaction with Youth school presentations, which are currently in progress throughout the City. In addition, the Police Department is creating several traffic and pedestrian safety programs specifically for Kennedy High School students. Officers are working closely with the Associated Student Body (ASB) Council and school officials to develop a multifaceted program designed to impress upon the students the need for traffic awareness and safety.

The initial kick-off of the program will involve the establishment of an annual "Blue Ribbon Week." Blue was Sydney Ramirez' favorite color. The target date for the first Blue Ribbon Week will be December 13 - 17, 2010, with future editions being held on the anniversary of the accident. The visual aspect of Blue Ribbon Week would consist of the Police Department providing blue ribbons to the students to tie on their backpacks and the ASB tying the ribbons on the cars in the JFK parking lot. The City will support the effort by having blue ribbons on all City vehicles during the week. Officers will also be on campus during the week to present pedestrian safety messages to the students.

The ASB and City agreed that the basis of any traffic safety program would have to be built around a strong enforcement program, with real consequences. They felt this would gain attention from the students and encourage compliance with the laws. As an alternative to issuing traditional citations for traffic and pedestrian violations near the school, they recommended an informal citation process that involved school consequences. For instance, violators would report to a school designee for penalty assignment, which could include community service or opting to wear a sign indicating that they violated traffic safety laws while they are at school for a week. This enforcement/punishment model has been endorsed by the school administration and teachers. A number of other possible consequences for law/safety violations were proposed and can be implemented later during the course of the evolving program. Of course, more serious violations or repeat violators would be handled in a more traditional law enforcement manner.

For positive reinforcement, the students suggested that officers issue gold star stickers to students they observe complying with the rules of the road or being safe in traffic. The officers will place a gold star on the student's school ID card, which by school rules must be carried at all times. The gold star would allow the student to obtain discounts on school athletic events, performances, and dances.

CONCLUSIONS:

Initial actions have been taken to maximize safety at the intersection while long-term engineering and education alternatives are fully considered.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The cost of the crossing guard at the intersection is approximately \$7,500 for a full school year. The cost of the traffic study is \$2,570. Both of these costs are being shared equally by the Cities of Cypress and La Palma. Depending on the outcome of the traffic study, future costs could be incurred for modification of the intersection.