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Published December 3rd, 2014

Reducing Traffic Congestion Gets High Marks

By Cathy Tyson

At a recent meeting of the collaborative Traffic Safety Task Force, the principals of Happy Valley and Springhill elementary schools reported major improvements in the twice per day traffic mess associated with student drop off and pick up. "We are light years ahead," said Teresa Gerringer, school board president, "from where we were to where we are."

Both schools took a comprehensive look at the problem with input from parents, teachers, police, city council representatives and the city manager, to make concrete changes to improve congestion. At Happy Valley Elementary a pilot program will soon morph into a more permanent solution with inner and outer pick up lanes, to hopefully alleviate what had been a quarter mile back up on Happy Valley Road weekdays around the school bell schedule. Neighbors weren't pleased with the situation, and parents were frustrated at the gridlock just to pick up a child from school.

Over Thanksgiving break at Happy Valley Elementary, lines were painted on the front turn around by the main office to clearly mark double lanes, which will accommodate twice the volume of vehicles - and more parking spaces were added, in an effort to get cars off of Happy Valley Road. Parents are also encouraged to slightly delay their pick up time to alleviate the peak crunch period after school: there's an 18-minute window from 2:42 to 3 p.m. when students are supervised. Principal Shayna Peeff asked that families avoid picking up kids on Franklin Lane, and consider carpooling or having kids walk or ride a bike.

"Franklin Lane is kind of chaotic," said officer Larry Seliga at the recent meeting, describing it as a social event for parents and kids hanging out on the center island. Police want kids to know that they cannot hang out on the center island, and kids were given coloring books and pencils as a reward for getting off the island.

"It's been pretty friendly so far, but we have met with some resistance from parents," said Seliga, who started with gentle reminders, but plans in the near future to be issuing citations.

An older gentleman representing the neighborhood who lives on Franklin Lane calls the situation "unsatisfactory," stating the school site itself is the proper location for student pick up and drop off.

"Our priority is that the kids are safe," said Peeff, acknowledging that the congestion on Happy Valley Road is a problem. She explained that with the new double lanes and 12 new parking spaces, more cars can get onto school property so fewer cars will be on the side streets.

According to City Manager Steven Falk, the city has spent over a million dollars over the past 18 years to install comprehensive walkways on Happy Valley Road and Upper Happy Valley. "It's way better than it was," he said.

Both Happy Valley and Springhill elementary schools had a coalition of interested parties who methodically looked at constructive ways to solve their schools' problems, starting with goals, forming strategies to meet those goals, considering resources, timeline, and an evaluation process, and establishing a system to manage the improvements.

The focus at Springhill Elementary was the front parking lot; getting more cars efficiently into the student pick up zones, having a consistent staff team to facilitate the pick-up process, adding a crossing guard at the crosswalk on San Reliez Court, and moving the buses to a different area on campus, according to interim principal Pat Gargiulo. While it used to take 15 to 16 minutes to clear the Springhill parking lot, it's now down to seven minutes, a measureable improvement.

Ultimately a wish list that includes speed tables, bollards (short vertical posts to control traffic), asphalt marking, flashing lights and a permanent mobile speed sign will be generated by the school district that will need to go through the Circulation Commission then to the City Council for approval and funding.

Next up for traffic improvement are Burton Valley and Lafayette elementary schools and Stanley Middle School. While the general plan is similar to Happy Valley and Springhill - do a complete assessment, develop a list of priorities and so on, Lafayette Elementary and Stanley will be much more difficult to find solutions for, due mainly to Moraga Road. "It's a gigantic complicated system,"

said Falk, adding that he's not optimistic that it will be easily or cheaply solved. "It's one of the many reasons the city is embarking on the downtown traffic study."

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