

Resident researches intersection looking for change

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Road with 'Do Not Drive on Shoulder' signs," Surdej wrote. She added, "The posted speed limit on U.S. Route 62 (NFB) will be reduced from 50 mph to 45 mph from just south/east of Errick Road to just south/east of Sy Road."

These current plans, Surdej said, are intended to be a stopgap measure, with work slated to begin on a long-term solution (dubbed a "safety project" on the DOT's website) in 2022.

The end goal is to widen the roadway and implement designated left turn lanes on Niagara Falls Boulevard (NFB), as well as Ward Road North and South. Other enhancements are to include intersection repaving, replacement and/or installation of curb ramps, new traffic signals, and crosswalks and pedestrian signals as needed.

A left-turn lane on the NFB and Witmer Road intersection will be added, as well.

According to the DOT website, the bid opening is expected to begin in spring 2022, construction to begin in summer 2022 and a completion estimate for summer 2023. The project cost is approximately \$5,400,000 and will be funded entirely by state and federal dollars.

The dangers surrounding the roadway, particularly at the Ward Road intersection, are no secret. Residents and local officials say the area has been a problem for decades. Yet, despite a number of proposed plans, and an ever-increasing total of accidents throughout the years, little has been done to address the issues.

"I've been dealing with it for over 30 years," St. Johnsburg Fire Co. Chief Richard Donner said. "I'd say in the past 15 years there's been more of a push to get this thing taken care of. It's been 15-20 years since they started redoing the boulevard all through North Tonawanda; basically right up to where the water department is and then the other section down towards Niagara Falls. Well, this little section in between, we're still getting accidents on a regular basis."

When asked how often his fire company deals with accidents in the area, Donner prefaced that his company normally only gets dispatched for accidents resulting in injuries. With that in mind, he said last year the fire company was responding to accidents in that area at a rate averaging two to three times a month.

"Without turning lanes at the intersections, we're seeing one person will try to beat the yellow light, another one will be turning and try to beat the yellow light. One's speeding up, one's turning to make the corner and it happens. We've seen a number of those,"

Donner said.

Finding exact figures regarding the roadway has proved to be no simple task. According to a FOIL request from the Niagara County Sheriff's Office, there have been 48 accidents at the intersection of Ward Road and NFB since 2016, 16 of which resulted in serious injury.

Yet, the sheriff's office's figures don't paint the entire picture as they only pertain to the intersection itself. Accidents just past the intersection were not included in the findings, including a tragic crash in January that took the life of a North Tonawanda High School student.

The most recent push to address the intersection itself was prompted by a serious accident in May. There, a 23-year-old male was airlifted by Mercy Flight to ECMC following a two-car, head-on motor vehicle accident. Following the accident, local officials including Niagara County Legislator Jesse Gooch and Town of Wheatfield Supervisor Don MacSwan called on the DOT to take action.

Resident Research

The incident also sparked residents to make their own voices heard. Chief among them has been Doris Carlson, who lives near the corner of the Ward and NFB. She said that, after countless accidents and years of waiting, she was determined to not let the issue fall by the wayside. She recently spearheaded a letter writing campaign that urged residents and local businesses to let state officials and the DOT know the issue won't soon be forgotten.

"It gets brought up, but nobody stays on it and that was my intention, to not let it be forgotten," Carlson said. "For at least the last 10-15 years, (the DOT) comes out and gives us a little bit of bait until we're quiet for a little while. Then they give a little bit more bait so we're quiet for a little longer; and nothing is done. They just keep postponing it and postponing it, because they know that the people are just gonna say 'OK, it's gonna happen' and drop it. For me that's too lax. ... I don't want that to happen again."

In order to better make her case, Carlson has done a fair bit of investigative reporting herself on the issue, and her finds have been intriguing to say the least.

Last month, she set about looking for statistics that would prove just how impactful the proposed long-term improvements could be to the Ward/NFB intersection. She focused on the nearby intersection of Nash Road and NFB that was redone over a decade ago.

"I picked that intersection because not only is the weight of traffic about

the same, but the physical changes that had to happen when they did the reconstruction are about the same also. The creek is in the same spot, and there was a business very close to the road that could not be moved," Carlson said.

She solicited the numbers from the NCSO for 2006, the year before rebuilding on Nash/NFB began, as well as 2009, the year just after work was completed. The year prior to reconstruction, the number of accidents recorded was 14. The first full year following the reconstruction, the number of accidents on record was three.

"This is a dramatic reduction, and this is a fact that we, as residents, can use in our plea to the politicians that represent our area," Carlson said.

Her findings were supported by Chris Pino, fire chief for Adam's Volunteer Fire Co. No. 1. Pino said that, before he started in 2002, his father and grandfather – who were each fire chiefs at one point – nicknamed the intersection "the corner of 'Smash and the Boulevard,'" because of the frequency of accidents. Since the reconstruction, Pino said, "Without running numbers or looking at the history, I would say it's gone down. ... From what I've been told, before I started, there used to be a lot more accidents at that intersection. There still are some, but not the degree it used to be."

Despite her efforts, the responses Carlson has received from state officials have amounted to little more than "thank you for reaching out," she said.

When asked what she would say to state officials and DOT representatives if given a proper chance, Carlson said, "I would just say that I'm in fear. I work at the corner of Nash and the boulevard and live at the corner of Ward and the boulevard. So I'm traveling that section, everyday twice, sometimes four times a day, because I come home for lunch. ... I just don't know why that particular section has been postponed."

Carlson added, "Every time I hear the sirens, I think, 'Oh, my god. I hope it's not a death. I hope it's not a child; I hope it's not a motorcycle.'"

Public Feedback

Carlson is certainly not alone in her fear. To gauge public perception of the Ward Road/NFB intersection, the Tribune recently asked residents to share their feelings about the roadway on the "Wheatfield, NY Community" group on Facebook. Within a few hours, close to 70 people commented. The overwhelming opinion was that the roadway is a significant safety hazard, with many sharing stories of their own accidents and near misses.

Many said the DOT's interim plans

– new signage and a speed limit reduction – do not go far enough to make a meaningful impact. Some also expressed skepticism that, after years of delays and false starts, the DOT will simply end up "punting" on the issue once again.

The following is just a sample of those comments.

•Debbie Rubeck DiBartolomeo said, "I'll just share that the intersection scares me to death. I avoid it as much as possible, even going way out of my way to do so, especially at busy traffic times. I live on Lemke and often hear the crashes, then the traffic will majorly increase down my street until the scene is cleared, and sadly I will often hear the Mercy Flight helicopter. The sooner they do anything to help that intersection, the better."

•Jennifer Nopper Kancar said, "Lowering the speed limit is not going to stop idiots from turning in front of oncoming traffic! The only solution to that intersection is turning lanes and arrows. I'll believe it when I see it happening!"

•Barb McGinnis Gotta said, "Turning lane is the common sense answer. Worked at the boulevard and Nash beautifully. When they don't want to make a move, they lower speed limits to make it look like they did something. It's taking way too long to fix this problem. Why all the excuses?"

•Erin Marohn said, "Since I was 10, I've been in three accidents on the corner of Sy and Route 62. All were me turning right, and getting hit by cars as I was stationary, waiting to turn. Two years ago, I was rear-ended on Route 62 while waiting to turn left onto Witmer. Car was going 50+ mph. I was stationary. My neighbors were in an accident several years ago by Church Road. The parents lost their lives. The two daughters lived. It's a scary stretch of road!"

In terms of skepticism to the overall project, residents aren't alone in those concerns.

"I've been working for the town for over 30 years and as (town water and sewer superintendent) for the last 11 years. I've seen the DOT come through with plans two or three times ... and they just keep pushing the date off further and further. So, it wouldn't surprise me if they were planning something for 2022 and then it gets pushed out further. I've seen it happen too many times already," Donner said.

MacSwan has previously shared his own frustrations about the continued delays. In June, after the DOT announced the 2022 plans and indicated it was purchasing property along the road to widen it, he lamented those plans have been floated for years with-

out any action.

"That talk goes back many, many years ago; they were going to acquire property. And some things have not changed," MacSwan said. "So now they're supposedly meeting with the owners of certain properties to acquire the property to make sure we have a full width to accommodate the turning lanes."

More recently, however, he seemed optimistic, both for the interim changes and the long-term plans. He noted the DOT's architectural team has begun preliminary discussions with the Wheatfield Enhancement Volunteers to work on some beautification efforts along the boulevard, something he sees as a good sign in the long run.

"I do think it will happen. I mean, I'm hoping that, with all the things going on with COVID-19, that it doesn't affect the budget for that job because, again, it's long overdue. But I think (DOT) is going to follow through. When I talked with them, they were very quick to get that speed limit reduced. They were very receptive. So I do think it's going to happen," MacSwan said.

He added, "Hopefully, it's gonna be a great improvement to the area. Obviously it is overdue, but finally it seems the DOT is taking steps to move this project forward. We definitely need the turning lanes, but the reduced speed limit will help somewhat, especially with law enforcement out there. I've seen, they've been out there lately with radar to catch the speeders. But I'm looking forward to it, not just for the Town of Wheatfield residents, but for anyone driving through it."

For his part, Donner is content that at least something is being done.

"Any kind of help they'll give us, from putting a turning lane in or lowering the speed limits. ... Anything will help," he said.

When asked what people can do in the meantime to stay safe on that road section, Donner said, "It still comes back to the people driving. They gotta pay attention. We've had numerous rear-end collisions. People need to pay attention, get off their cell phones, keep their heads up and pay attention to the traffic. ... People are in a hurry; people need to slow down a little bit and take their time."

For Carlson, the interim period is not a time for residents to become complacent, lest history repeats itself. In an urgent message to her fellow neighbors, her position was clear: "Please be more voiceful to the DOT, the county, and local and state representatives. Be more vocal and be heard."

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Board approves Oak Run PIPs, hears on water lines

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Road site produces enough electricity to power about 1,000 households. While much of that power does go to the grid, he said the town could actually benefit from its generation, too.

Of those 1,000 households of power, "That's a conservative number (on power generation)," he said. "So folks in Lewiston (could) actually be using

the power from that solar farm."

Outlining the Ampion proposal, Buzby said the Town of Lewiston – and its residents – could "participate in the program that would allow you to save money on electricity costs.

"What we've done with some other communities (who have signed on to this venture) is Ampion would donate \$100 to a special town fund (of its own

choice) ... for each resident who joins the program," he said.

Discussing how the town's arrangement could work, Buzby said that, under that scenario, Ampion would review the town's individual accounts (i.e. departments such as water, sewer or highway) and usage needs, etc., to determine eligibility and the ultimate

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