

Complaints, solutions aired at public safety meeting in Donald

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New Donald/Aurora I-5 interchange project could cost up to \$70 million



INDEPENDENT PHOTO: LARRY COONROD - A crowd of more than 100 people filled the Donald Fire Station last Wednesday to discuss with officials concerns regarding traffic in northern Marion County.

Marion County officials acknowledge that traffic and traffic accidents in north Marion County are getting worse, but say it will take money and time to fix.

More than 100 people filled the Donald Fire Hall on Sept. 7 to vent their frustrations and ask questions of Sheriff Jason Myers, Marion County Public Works Director Alan Haley and an Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) official. Marion County Commissioner Kevin Cameron moderated the two-hour meeting and acknowledged public concerns about increased traffic on rural roads.

“It’s not just north Marion County that traffic deaths are on the increase; it’s the whole state of Oregon and the nation,” he said.

Former St. Paul mayor Steve Manners played a graphic recording of a voicemail his wife left on his phone pleading for help after a serious accident that occurred at the intersection of McKay Road and Highway 219 on March 16.

“She is still in physical therapy recovering,” he said. “Unfortunately since my wife’s accident, there’s been two fatalities.”

John Branhorst, who has lived on the corner of Butteville and Ehlen roads for 10 years, testified that the number of accidents occurring at the intersection has increased.

“I can’t begin to tell you the number of accidents I’ve seen,” he said. “I’m getting tired of being a first responder and seeing bloody, mangled people.”

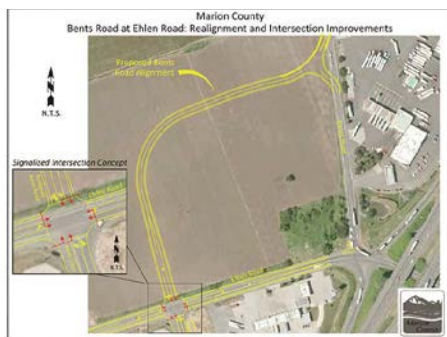
Marion County Sheriff's Lt. Jerry Adcock agreed that the statistics bear out citizens' anecdotal stories. In the first six months of 2016, the sheriff's office recorded 536 accidents in the north county region on non-state highway roads and 10 fatalities. By comparison, in the south county region, with more than double the population, there were 439 accidents with two being fatal. Deputies issued 3,002 citations in north Marion County compared to 1,656 in the south. Excessive speeds topped the list of most common violations. Deputies caught one vehicle traveling at 156 mph.

Several citizens spoke to a perceived lack of enforcement by the sheriff's department as a reason for unsafe driver behavior and accidents. Myers said the sheriff's office lacks the personnel to devote more resources to traffic enforcement. MCSO fields 36 patrol deputies assigned to cover a population of 362,000 spread over nearly 1,200 square miles when fully staffed. Due to retirements, Myers said the sheriff's office has eight deputies in training and five vacant positions.

"Even when we are fully staffed, we have five to six deputies and one sergeant covering the entire county," Myers said. "That's not a lot of resources."

Myers said most of the deputies' time is spent responding to calls in suburban east Salem, leaving few resources for patrolling the outer areas.

"One of the strategies I'm working with the county commissioners on is a specific law enforcement levy to add 20 deputy positions to the sheriff's office so we can have a presence in the outer area," he said. "The concerns you are talking about here tonight are the same concerns I hear in Jefferson and same concerns I hear in Detroit and Idanha."



COURTESY PHOTO: MARION COUNTY - This diagram shows Marion County's planned realignment of Bents Road to ease traffic congestion near the Donald/Aurora I-5 interchange.

Marion County Public Works Director Alan Haley said the county is working on a number of solutions, such as more signage, cross grooves at intersections, traffic roundabouts and a camera system at the intersection of Butteville and Ehlen roads to warn drivers of approaching traffic. The county plans to realign the southern end of Bents Road to intersect farther west at Bents Court on Ehlen Road to lessen traffic congestion at the Interstate 5 interchange.

"We'll be starting in 2017-18 with the preliminary engineering and design and we should be in construction in 2019," Haley said.

The Donald-Aurora interchange at I-5 was a focus of many complaints during the Donald meeting. Currently, vehicles exiting I-5 must come to a complete stop at Ehlen Road and wait for traffic to clear before turning right or left. Semitrailers waiting to turn west from the off ramp to reach two large truck stops frequently cause traffic to back up onto the interstate, several people testified.



INDEPENDENT PHOTO: LARRY COONROD - Traffic at the I-5 interchange with Ehlen Road is frequently congested, in large part because of two truck stops. A state official said rebuilding the interchange could cost up to \$70 million.

The best solution is rebuilding the interchange to move traffic efficiently on and off the interstate, similar to the Woodburn interchange completed in 2015.

Tim Potter, with the Oregon Department of Transportation Region 2 office, said the state has the money to begin designing an interchange this year, but no funding is yet on the horizon to pay for it.

“We just finished the Woodburn interchange and that was a \$72 million project,” Potter said. “We don’t have an estimate of how much Aurora-Donald would be, but it wouldn’t surprise me if it’s in that magnitude of \$50 million to \$70 million to rebuild that interchange. It’s all going to come down to whether we can identify the funding.”

Despite numerous concerns voiced to the contrary, Potter disputed the notion that the planned Newberg Dundee bypass project at highways 219 and 99W would increase traffic on some north Marion County roads. After traffic studies, ODOT believes traffic going from Newberg to the south now will continue to do so, “but no additional traffic will come from the bypass,” Potter said.

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