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Burgess Road residents lobby for sidewalks

T.S. Strickland, Staff Writer Published 7:05 p.m. CT July 31, 2014 | Updated 7:05 p.m. CT July 31, 2014

Residents of Burgess Road are asking city leaders to address longstanding safety concerns.



Residents of one Pensacola neighborhood are asking city leaders to address longstanding concerns about speeding and pedestrian safety.

Parker Circle — located east of Davis Highway and south of Creighton Road — straddles the city-county line. Motorists routinely cut through the neighborhood to avoid the traffic light at Davis and Creighton — flying down Burgess Road, which has a speed limit of 25 mph — at speeds as fast as 70, residents say.

For Curtis Boudreaux, this is worrisome. Boudreaux is one of several dozen residents whose homes front the busy street. His 16-year-old daughter, who attends Washington High School, had to obtain a special waiver from the school district to ride the bus.

Most children living in the neighborhood — including 11 elementary and middle schoolers — live within the district's "walk zone," meaning they aren't eligible for public transportation. Those who have no other means must walk in the street or ditches because of the lack of sidewalks along Burgess, residents report.

Rob Doss, director of transportation for the Escambia County School District, said those students could apply for bus service on a space available basis. However, the district is not able to accommodate all requests.

The Parker Circle Neighborhood Association sent a letter to Pensacola Mayor Ashton Hayward in July, asking that he allocate \$60,000 toward an engineering plan to begin to address the problem.

"It's an awfully scary situation," Boudreaux said Thursday of the lack of sidewalks. The city has stepped up patrols in the area and installed automated speed signs in response to residents' complaints. During one 18-month period from 2012-13, police issued 278 traffic citations along the road. So far this year, there have been 81. However, Boudreaux said the overall effect of the enforcement has been minimal.

"They rely on the police to address speeding issues," he said, "but do nothing to address the issue that there's no place for our kids to walk."

For the past three years, Councilwoman Sherri Myers — who lives in and represents the neighborhood — has asked the city to fix the problem. In 2011, she partnered with Escambia County Commissioner Grover Robinson in proposing a joint solution.

The county agreed to set aside \$350,000 of local option sales taxes to build sidewalks, curbs and gutters along Burgess. The city, which encompasses the greater part of the roadway, was asked to foot the remaining \$1.05 million worth of work. Robinson said the project stalled when the city refused to commit.

The county later installed sidewalks on Lanier Street and a four-way stop at the intersection of Burgess and Sanders Street, the site of a significant number of wrecks in prior years. However, Burgess still has no sidewalks.

City officials said the project had been hampered by limited resources and greater needs elsewhere in the city.

City Administrator Colleen Castille noted that the project would be extraordinarily expensive. Besides having no sidewalks, the road also lacks curbs and gutters — a legacy of past leaders' reluctance to embrace more stringent development laws.

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"Pensacola spends approximately \$2,526,500 on both streets and sidewalks on an annual basis," Castille said. "The proposal for funding for the city's portion of Burgess Road, sidewalk, street repaving, placement of curb and gutter and stormwater pipes is \$1,050,000 — nearly 40 percent of the city's (street) funding."

Castille added that other areas — such as West Cervantes Street, Ninth Avenue and 12th Avenue — had perhaps greater needs for the limited available funding.

"Costs have to be weighed against benefits," said Tamara Fountain, communications administrator for the city. "With finite resources, you can't always do every project."

Officials have invested in sidewalk improvements elsewhere in the city — spending more than \$1.8 million during the past five years. Hayward has proposed spending another \$350,000 in the next year — mostly within Pensacola's urban core.

John Phillips, a past president of the Parker Circle Neighborhood Association, said he and his neighbors felt neglected by city leaders, whom he said seemed to care more about downtown Pensacola than uptown residents. He recognized other areas of the city also needed attention but added that Parker Circle has been asking for help since neighborhood residents voted to join the city in the early 1960s.

Doss, an outspoken sidewalk advocate, said he felt other areas — especially in the city and county's lower-income neighborhoods — had more urgent needs than Parker Circle. He added, however, that the choice need not be a zero-sum game — if only local governments were willing to invest more in pedestrian infrastructure, as a whole. Doing so is important, he said.

"From an education standpoint, I believe there is a correlation between the extent and quality of a community's development, which includes lighting and a safe walking infrastructure, and a student's readiness for a day of learning," he said.

Doss added that the implications for safety, public health, government spending and the environment also were clear.

"A well-lit (sidewalk) safely separated from speeding traffic improves citizen safety," he said. "A population that is more inclined to walk reasonable distances to schools and stores is a healthier population. When more people feel safe enough to walk that they leave their cars at home and don't need to ride the school bus to school, government spends less on transportation and fuel, and the environment benefits from fewer vehicles emitting exhaust and burning fuel."

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