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Accident awareness

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Los Altos' traffic collisions pervasive, yet statistics offer no big surprises

By Eliza Ridgeway, Town Crier Staff Writer



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- [Transportation](#) Los Altos police and fire personnel interview a woman involved in a car accident at El Monte Avenue and Covington Road in December 2006.
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As every city council member will attest, traffic control and safety is a standard issue on the campaign stump, and a critical matter of local concern. An analysis of city traffic data reveals predictable problems and settings that lead to collisions, yet ongoing logistical and funding barriers block traffic solutions.

According to a 2005 report from then-police chief Bob Lacey, a notable percentage of Los Altos traffic accidents occur during poorly timed left-hand turns at intersections without signal lights. Those ill-advised turns are dispersed throughout city, rather than clustered in a problem area. Adding traffic signals to a single intersection costs the city more than \$250,000.

Risk factors for schoolchildren, cyclists

The city logged reports of 1,468 accidents over the past four years, 415 of which involved injury or death. El Camino Real and Foothill Expressway saw the lion's share of crashes, with 247 and 282, respectively, followed by the intersection where Edith Avenue, Main Street and San Antonio Road meet. That intersection at the base of the downtown triangle registered 49 accidents, more than double any other problem spot.

A statistical study from the traffic commission, analyzing data from police and state databases, provides a picture of Los Altos' traffic accidents as predictable, if not preventable. According to Bill Crook, chairman of the traffic commission, for the most part collision incidence rose proportionally to traffic density, with spikes for unusual areas such as Los Altos High School.

The police department recorded 59 bicycle accidents in the past four years, the majority involving cars, but with many solo collisions between a bike and an inanimate object. When cyclists and drivers did collide, the primary factor cited was the driver's failure to yield the right of way. Six accidents involved school-age children during school commute hours. Crook said he suspected the numbers are skewed by a tendency not to report noninjury

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bicycle collisions.

Of the 18 reported pedestrian accidents, all involved motor vehicles, and police found the driver at fault 67 percent of the time. More than half the time, the pedestrian involved was in a crosswalk. Two of the incidents involved school-age walkers, both near Los Altos High School.

The one recorded fatality for a collision in the past four years involved pedestrian Henry Kolm, who died in 2005 after being hit in a crosswalk on San Antonio Road. His death was cited as impetus for the flashing pedestrian lights currently being installed at four intersections on the road. Rains have delayed the project, originally scheduled for completion by Thursday.

In the face of the danger and expense of traffic collisions, the city seeks to protect the roadways through preventive policing and engineering. In 2006, the Los Altos Police Department issued 1,759 speeding citations in the city. The number will likely prove lower when tabulated for 2007, when the city council elected to preserve low speeds on 11 streets, despite the resultant ban on radar speed ticketing. For most of last summer, radar ticketing on streets throughout Los Altos went unenforced due to state regulations about city maintenance of speed-limit surveys.

A seven-member traffic commission coordinates with the council, police and community to pinpoint and resolve traffic problems and develop funding proposals, as does a seven-member Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. All residents can participate in the Neighborhood Traffic Management Program, which develops traffic control solutions for specific residential streets.

Schools' needs

Crossing guards earned a laudable mention in the city's collision data – none of the pedestrian accidents occurred at an intersection with a guard present. The PTA-sponsored appreciation day scheduled Tuesday honors the adults who keep an eye on the school commute.

“Getting out there when it’s about freezing or raining or extremely hot – it takes a particular kind of person to do that for \$15 an hour,” Crook said.

In addition to hiring crossing guards, the city troubleshoots in school areas. The intersection of El Monte Avenue and Covington Road, particularly

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notorious among parents and civilians trying to run the gauntlet of school traffic, sees high tempers and close calls, but the city and school district haven't identified easy solutions.

Los Altos' 15 public and private schools face intensified traffic dangers for commuting children, parents and neighbors, and the city has responded with engineering solutions and continued support for the crossing-guard program, jointly sponsored with the school districts and police department.

Engineered solutions include raised sidewalks, pedestrian countdown signals at intersections and radar signs that flash motorists' speeds.

Jim Fenton, a recent addition to the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, is working on bike-safety programming for the Los Altos School District, taking inspiration from events like the bike rodeo at Almond School. He has a third-grade daughter at Covington School, where a parent is training to teach bicycle safety.

"This is really a logical extension of the Safe Routes to School program, but it's focusing on really starting at the elementary school level," he said. "I still have a very clear memory of (attending) a bike rodeo when I was 6 or 7. I learned things like hand signals, where reflectors should be on your bicycle and rules regarding keeping to the side of the road."

Beyond the basic rules of bicycling, trained instructors offer safety tips gleaned from experience – Fenton pointed out that in addition to hand signals, cyclists can add subtle forms of communication such as eye contact to ensure they are communicating with drivers, skills that students don't automatically adopt.

Bicycles and pedestrians offer solutions

California vehicle code requires that cars and bicycles yield the right of way to pedestrians at intersection crosswalks, and cars are required to share the road with bicycles. Cyclists have the same rights and responsibilities as motorists, including the right to move into the left lane to make left turns, and to move out of the bike lane into the right to avoid obstacles.

Randy Rhody, a member of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, dreams of city streets designed to



In Our Opinion

Letters to the Editor

Is everything really 'fair game'?

Mr. Randy Kenyon said ("LASD facing \$1.1 million deficit after state budget cuts," Jan. 30) that "...everything is fair game" when it comes to looking at what should be cut to address the \$1.1 million deficit our school district faces. I wish that were really true.

respect cycling.

“I want to go one step beyond traffic calming. I would like to see the streets be ‘traffic inconveniencing.’ Let’s stop making it so easy for cars to be zooming around,” he said.

Rhody connected driving issues to Los Altos’ recent Cool Cities project, which aims to reduce emissions.

“Part of the greening is to provide alternatives to motors,” he said.

He pointed to new developments – such as the planned reopening of the Foodland market on Los Altos Avenue and renovation of the civic center – as opportunities to cultivate a pedestrian-oriented city.

“I like bringing the streets down to a human scale. San Antonio Road is no-man’s land, it’s not on a human scale,” Rhody said. “Los Altos’ street system was laid out in the ’50s – it was laid out when Detroit was king.”

The city hired a consultant to study possible routes for the Stevens Creek Trail, a pathway proposed to stretch through Los Altos, Mountain View and Cupertino. Rhody said that a final recommendation will come before the Los Altos City Council by springtime, and that much of the entire project can win regional funding.

“There’s tons of money that VTA (Valley Transportation Authority) is ready to just give us to do all this,” he said. “Construction will probably be done in increments.”

Funding options

The city turns to regional funding for much of its traffic improvement. In particular, the state and federal Safe Routes to Schools programs, which fund projects that directly affect the school commute, have brought cash to Los Altos. The city is preparing to take bids for a Safe Routes to School project that won funding from the state in June 2006. The project, aimed for completion before school begins in the fall, includes crosswalk improvements at several key intersections near elementary schools.

The city’s 2007 Safe Routes funding application has passed the first cut with state administrators and is under evaluation in Sacramento. It would include nine projects in school neighborhoods, ranging from radar speed-limit

signs to raised crosswalks and pedestrian-countdown crossing signals. City staff are planning a 2008 application to fund a cement sidewalk on West Portola Avenue, and possibly traffic calming on West Portola at Carmel Avenue.

“We’re trying to improve the commute used by so many kids going to Egan and Santa Rita,” Crook said. “The kids and the bicyclists tend to share what was maybe a pathway in the ’50s.”

“Safe Routes is about the only funding we’re bringing into the city to do traffic calming, and it’s got to be close to schools (to qualify),” Crook said.

He cited the Berry Avenue traffic-calming project, the first from Safe Routes to School, as a success story.

“My view is that we’ve got two to three times as many kids walking and biking as we ever had before to Loyola School,” Crook said. “I see people walking, it’s a safe route, it’s a pleasant route. People are using it to get to Rancho Shopping Center.”

Crook said many cities are spending a great deal of money to install pathways to get residents walking and out of the automobiles. “If the Stevens Creek pathway is designed correctly, that could work for a lot of people in Los Altos. The people who are going to be using it are the people who live right by it,” he said.

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