

I heard an interesting presentation by Steve Buchanan at a recent Southwestern Commission Transportation Advisory Committee meeting. Steve is the traffic engineer in charge of signal light, stop signs, roundabouts, and crosswalk installations for Division 14.

The decision-making process that Steve and his team undergo in installing a light or stop sign is not that simple as the review with us. Nor is it necessarily inexpensive. A major install of a signal light at an intersection runs about a quarter of a million dollars.

There are three major criteria for deciding about installing a stop sign, signal light or even a roundabout. First a traffic study to determine the amount of traffic at for example an intersection. Factors such as the number of driveways near the intersection will be considered. Steve pointed out there are very isolated intersections in the division where the traffic is so light that signal lights or even stop signs are not warranted.

The engineers also evaluate more information before making a decision, such as accident history at an intersection and existing sight distances. This applies to a decision about installing roundabouts and crosswalks on major highways. Two crosswalks are now in progress of being installed on US 64 at Chestnut and one at Hickory Street.

Another factor is who is the entity in charge of a road or intersection. Some roads in town are private, others town roads and a number of state roads. Recently, someone contacted DOT to complain that there was no stop sign at Gibson and Smallwood. Also, a complaint was made that there are no stop signs at the intersection of Oak and 2nd Streets next to the Baptist Church.

Both of these intersections are at town roads, so NCDOT does not make the decision about whether to install stop signs, the town does. With that said, our town engineer and road department follows the criteria that NCDOT uses.

As for Gibson and Smallwood there are several factors to be considered. First, it is very lightly traveled and second there is no history of accidents at the intersection. Second, there are some sight distance issues that will be addressed. Third, the steep topography on Smallwood it does create a unique situation for the intersection. Our staff is developing a plan for the intersection. Simply placing stop signs there may not be the best solution.

As for 2nd Street and Oak, similar issues can be applied. First, there is ample sight distance from all entrances to the intersection. Second, there is no major history of accidents at the intersection. Third, there is a light traffic pattern at the intersection. And finally, installing stop signs would require a total redesign of the intersection which would include loss of parking spaces. I do not see stop signs being installed at the intersection anytime soon.

One personal observation is in order here. I observe cars approaching many of our intersections with stop signs. Unfortunately, a lot of motorists use the roll through method instead of coming to a complete stop. Self confession, I have been guilty of that too. The point is that all the traffic control gadgets we use do not guarantee people will take personal responsibility to operate a vehicle safely.

Finally let discuss roundabouts in Highlands. Many folks still think a roundabout is in order for the intersection at US 64, Satulah and South Streets. I like roundabouts, but I do not think our town street system requires the proliferation of roundabouts. Steve indicated that the smallest radius distance for a roundabout is 75 feet. Or put another way 50 yards across the roundabout which is half the length of a football field. He points out that large trucks, like we see traversing US 64, must have this minimum distance to make a roundabout turn.

Examining the criteria for a roundabout as mentioned above, there would be several problematic issues. First, the traffic patten is light and second there is no history of recurring major accidents. Also to meet the area needs for a basic roundabout would require more right-of-way that exists now. My solution is simple. Every motorist should come to a full stop to at least one of the multiple stop signs at the intersection, especially at the one at the entry to US 64.