

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 lights, stop signs, roundabouts, and crosswalk installations for Division 14.

The decision-making process Steve and his team go through when installing a light or stop sign is not simple. Nor is it inexpensive. A major installation of a signal light at an intersection runs about a quarter of a million dollars.

There are three major criteria for deciding whether to install a stop sign, a signal light, or even a roundabout. First, a traffic study is conducted to determine the volume and pattern of traffic at the intersection. Factors such as the number of driveways near the intersection are considered. Steve pointed out that there are very isolated intersections in the division where the traffic is so light that signal lights or even stop signs are not called for.

The engineers also evaluate additional information before making a decision, such as accident history at an intersection and existing sight distances. These factors also apply to decisions about installing roundabouts and crosswalks on major highways. The two crosswalks that were completed last week on US 64 at Chestnut and one at Hickory Street underwent this review process before approval by NCDOT.

Another factor is which government entity is responsible for a road or intersection. Some roads in town are private, others may be town roads, and many are state roads. Recently, someone contacted NCDOT to express concern that there was no stop sign at the intersection of Gibson and Smallwood. Also, a concern was raised about the lack of stop signs at the intersection of Oak and 2nd Streets, next to First Baptist Church.

Both of these intersections are town roads, so NCDOT does not decide whether to install stop signs; the town does. With that said, our town engineer and road department follow the general criteria NCDOT uses.

As for Gibson and Smallwood, there are several factors to be considered. First, it is very lightly traveled. Second, there is no history of accidents at the intersection. Third, some sight-distance issues are being evaluated. Fourth, the steep topography of Smallwood creates 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, including the 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 see cars approaching many of our intersections with stop signs. Unfortunately, many 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 devices we use do not guarantee that people will take personal responsibility for operating a vehicle safely.

Finally, there is the recurring issue of placing roundabouts in the Highlands. Some folks still think a roundabout is needed at the intersection of US 64, Satulah, and South Streets. I like roundabouts, but I do not think our town's street system is a good match for these structures. Steve indicated that the smallest radius distance for a roundabout is 75 feet. Or put another way, a minimum distant for a roundabout would 50-yard circle. That distance is the width of a football field. He points out that large trucks, like those we see traversing US 64, must have this minimum distance to make a roundabout turn.

Examining the criteria for a roundabout at this location would reveal several problematic issues. First, the traffic pattern is light. Second, there is no history of recurring major accidents. Third, to meet the area's needs for a basic roundabout would require more right-of-way than exists now. My solution is simple. Every motorist should come to a full stop at the multiple stop signs at the intersection, especially at the one at the entry to US 64.

One final note. Sometimes residents take it upon themselves to place signs on state and town roads to control or moderate traffic. These private signs are not authorized by a government agency. Those who place such signs in a public right-of-way may expose themselves to liability if the sign causes problems for motorists traversing the public vehicular byway. Such is the case with an unauthorized sign recently placed on the signal light pole at the entrance to Little Bear Pen and US 64. Also, contractors or homeowners working next to public road right-of-ways should exercise caution when removing road signs. Notifying the town or NCDOT is advised. At least, the signs should be placed where they were removed when work is completed.

Tonight, July 16, is the town board meeting at the Highlands Community Center. It starts at 7 pm. The main agenda item is the continuation of the discussion with McGill Engineering concerning the Mirror Lake Project