

Taking stock of Route 9's traffic woes

Survey may speed fixes for worst intersections

By James O'Brien

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The state Highway Department and the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission are using newly compiled data about vehicle collision hot spots in communities along Route 9 to plan short-term fixes and deal with longer-term problems for the transportation artery.

Officials say housing growth in recent years has fueled a surge in traffic along the major routes through the area, and made intersections more congested and dangerous.

The planning commission reports that Shrewsbury's portion of Route 9, which runs between the town's borders with Northborough and Worcester, logged 744 car crashes from 2004 to 2006, the most of any suburban stretch measured in the study.

The worst spot was Route 9's intersection with South Street, which logged 58 accidents.

In Westborough, there were 327 vehicular crashes between 2004 and 2006 along Route 9, from the town's border with Northborough to the southbound ramp of Interstate 495. Police Chief Alan Gordon said high-frequency crash sites along the stretch include its intersections with Lyman Street, Otis Street, Route 30, and Route 135.

Meanwhile, Northborough officials say they are seeking state funds to correct problems where Route 20 intersects with its downtown streets.

MassHighway is working with the regional planning commission to "address issues that could be safety factors, with both low-cost and longer-term, more financially substantial fixes," according to spokesman Klark Jessen.

He said that the drop in state revenues caused by the dismal economy will not prevent the Highway Department from working with the commission to respond to safety issues on state roads.

As the planning commission entered its final week of collecting information for its roadway safety audits, Sujatha Mohanakrishnan, its principal planner, said "low-cost shotgun fixes" could include rumble strips and additional traffic signals at accident-plagued intersections and corridors.

Mohanakrishnan said the information was key to the commission's channeling of \$900,000 that MassHighway sets aside annually for highway improvement projects.

Police Chief Gordon said the problems along Westborough's portion of Route 9 can stretch throughout the day, particularly during the week.

"Between 7 and 8:30 in the morning, you might get a mile-and-a-half backup," Gordon said. "We see low-speed accidents in the morning. Once the commute is over, you get higher-speed accidents."

Town Engineer Carl Balduf said private developers have suggested improvements to Route 9, but "none of these have come to fruition." On the other hand, he said, "at Lyman Street, the state is starting a design to improve that intersection on their own."

The good news is that when such fixes are put in place, Mohanakrishnan said, they should work.

The Shrewsbury intersection of Route 9 and Quinsigamond Avenue was originally ranked first in crashes in the region in the current report, Mohanakrishnan said, but improvements since the study's time period have changed its status.

"Construction was done to alleviate safety issues," Mohanakrishnan said of work completed in 2007, and the site has been taken off the list to reflect the expected outcome of those improvements.

But Shrewsbury still faces problems.

The commission report showed that seven intersections along Route 9 and other state roads in Shrewsbury had a total of 156 crashes between 2004 and 2006. Police Sergeant Alfred Pratt said the town is also asking the commission to look into Route 9 intersections near the White City Shopping Center and Grafton Street's intersection with Route 20.

In Northborough, Fred Litchfield, the town engineer, said a private developer was seeking permits to improve ramps from Route 20 to Route 9, but funding is needed for fixes to Route 20 where it intersects with downtown side streets.

The Route 9 and Route 20 corridors in Northborough accounted for 219 crashes from 2004 to 2006, according to the commission.

Litchfield said the town has applied for state funds to change its downtown intersections, working with MassHighway and the planning commission.

"Meanwhile, we hired our own consultant to look at putting in a new signal with a separate lane to cut down on collisions," said Litchfield. ■