

Traffic study near Dakota HS calls for new traffic lights, more time for student drivers

By Joshua Gordon

September 20, 2017



Traffic backs up on East Drive at 21 Mile Road after Dakota High School let out Sept. 14. A traffic study suggests putting a light at the intersection. (Photo by Erin Sanchez)



Cars line up on Cougar Drive at Heydenreich Road after Dakota High School let out Sept. 14. The traffic study recommends extending the light's timing to provide for a better flow. (Photo by Erin Sanchez)

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — A traffic study performed around the Chippewa Valley Schools campus in Macomb Township anchored by Dakota High School suggests new traffic lights, longer light cycles and a new left-turn lane.

The Transportation Improvement Association, or TIA, performed a multi-step traffic study on the roads around and part of the school campus to determine where changes could be made to help alleviate traffic congestion and make the area safer for the students.

Jim Santilli, CEO of TIA, said the study came about after 14-year-old Victoria Cartwright was killed by a vehicle while crossing Heydenreich just north of 21 Mile Road in November of last year.

Santilli's wife works with the school district and approached him about helping before Superintendent Ron Roberts reached out to inquire about assistance in a traffic study.

Santilli said it cost about \$20,000 to do the study, but TIA did not charge the school district as they felt it was a study that needed to be done for the safety of the students.

"Anytime someone is killed or injured in a crash, no matter where it is, it is something you wish you could go back and change," Santilli said. "Our goal with this whole situation is we want to prevent this from happening again."

TIA conducted several field observations and looked at traffic and pedestrian counts with automatic traffic counters and visual observations. They also did an aerial observation and went through the crash history in the area.

Santilli said the crash history showed a lot of rear-end crashes and head-on, left-turn crashes. The crashes typically happened during clear days and dry conditions, indicating human error, he said.

“Basically, we need people to pay attention when they are on the road as there are a lot of distractions taking place nowadays,” Santilli said. “And not take risks when taking a left turn and turning in front of a vehicle.”

The Dakota High School campus is particularly busy as the high school shares the area with the ninth-grade center, Seneca Middle School and Cheyenne Elementary School, all located north of 21 Mile and east of Heydenreich.

Besides the intersection of 21 Mile and Heydenreich, TIA engineer Dave Allyn said the intersection of Cougar Drive and Heydenreich, as well as the intersections of Dakota Boulevard and East Drive with 21 Mile, are busy during the start of school and when it lets out.

Allyn said TIA suggests adding a traffic signal at 21 Mile and East Drive that would help maintain traffic turning off of 21 Mile onto East Drive and vice versa. Allyn said they also recommend the signal not affect eastbound through traffic on 21 Mile at East Drive, and for traffic to not be able to turn left onto 21 Mile from East Drive.

The traffic signals at Cougar and Heydenreich as well as Dakota and 21 Mile should have longer cycles after school, Allyn said. There is a lot of pedestrian traffic at Cougar and it stops vehicles from being able to turn right on Heydenreich and backs up traffic.

TIA suggests increasing the signal at Cougar and Heydenreich from 80 seconds to 120 seconds for 30 minutes after school, with the Cougar traffic getting the additional time to allow for pedestrians and the school traffic to clear out faster.

The intersection of Cougar and Dakota is currently a four-way stop on the campus, Allyn said, and TIA recommends adding a 300- to 450-foot left-turn lane on eastbound Cougar to allow more space for traffic.

The final recommendation was to prohibit left turns out of Cheyenne onto Heydenreich and to make the south parking lot for the elementary school a second drop-off area for parents that would allow them to exit onto Cougar and make a left turn onto Heydenreich at the traffic signal.

The study showed there is a more than sufficient amount of crossing guards, which Roberts said is great to hear. It also showed a majority of the time, students were crossing streets in a safe manner, such as at crosswalks.

While the district’s Board of Education will look over the extensive study, Roberts said he felt the changes recommended made sense to provide safety for pedestrians and drivers.

“With Dakota being the largest high school in the state of Michigan, there are challenges managing student drivers and parent drivers,” he said. “If we can do some things to change the light timing to more fluidly have cars leave the parking lot during the day, that will be helpful.”

Macomb Township officials confirmed last December a speed study is underway on Heydenreich to see if the road’s 50 mph speed limit could be reduced.