

Cooper Street: talk but no action

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(First of a series)

A university official this semester was overheard saying, "If we don't do anything about it soon, someone is going to get killed. Then, I think a bunch of people will rise in wrath and raise hell."

The point in question is Cooper Street, also known as State Highway 157, long a thorn in the side of students, administrators and area residents.

It is a situation that has gone a significant period without any major solution or action.

The problem surfaced again the night of Feb. 7. Freshman psychology major Michael Psencik was struck by a car as he waited in the middle of the street to finish crossing.

Although released the following day from an area hospital, his mishap raises several questions, among them— are there any long-plans, or temporary plans, for making Cooper Street safer?

"As a matter of fact, we are looking at a proposal that would put some type of shrubbery down the sides of Cooper Street," Dudley Wetsel, vice president for business affairs, said Wednesday.

"This would allow students, or should I say force them, to use the designated crosswalks instead of jaywalking. And that (jaywalking) is a problem."

Safety officer George Bennett says he's against it.

"Why? Because it would increase the number of people exposed to traffic, thus creating more hazards," he said. "I am referring, of course, to the people who would have to maintain this shrubbery."

Bennett admits jaywalking occurs but says a large percentage of students never go through a crosswalk because they are frustrated by the long waiting time.

In a survey, Bennett said he found an average of 57 students jaywalk across Cooper during peak passing periods.

Arlington city traffic safety director Jack Loggins added he's surprised that "not too many pedestrians" have been involved in more accidents.

"In the case of pedestrians, I am surprised because so few of them obey the traffic signals."

This is especially surprising, he said, because of the rating his office gives Cooper Street between Abram and Mitchell streets.

Analysis

The rating for the fourth quarter of 1976 was 3,699 with 33 accidents. The rating is based on the number of accidents every 100 million driving miles.

This compares with the high Arlington accident rating of 5,379 between the 100 and 300 blocks of North Center.

To try and solve some of the Cooper Street hazards, Bennett and Wetsel have sent recommendations to Arlington City Mgr. Ross Calhoun.

"The crosswalk lights should be adjusted to give the pedestrians preference. My assessment is the lights have been established for the exclusivity of the car to get through the campus area much faster," Bennett explained.

He estimates it takes a car 40 seconds to travel the campus part of Cooper Street.

"This means cars will have to wait longer at the lights but it also means pedestrians will have a shorter waiting time at the crosswalks," he said.

"This will cause traffic jam-ups during certain peak hours, but so what?" he added.

"I contend that this is good. Once a driver encounters a traffic jam, he will deviate from the normal route. He will find other ways to go north and south."

Past surveys show an average of more than 25,000 cars use the campus area of Cooper daily. Pedestrian crossings average more than 9,000.

"Are we going to lean toward the convenience of the automobile or toward the safeties of the student?" Bennett asked.

Bennett and Wetsel suggest lowering the speed limit from 30 miles per hour to 20. Bennett also wants 157 rerouted from Cooper to Collins Street as soon as repairs are completed on Collins.

But, he noted, "the city holds the trump card. It is their city and their road. Lobbyists have considerable clout with them. But at some point in time safety will have to become a prominent factor."

"Let me put it this way. If we had a sewer gas explosion and it blew up the entire campus length of Cooper Street, it would totally destroy this university. Nobody would be able to cross it."

"But if Cooper Street blew up and cars could not get through, in a matter of hours the city of Arlington wouldn't even know about it. They would sure enough have found another route to go through."

Wetsel thinks a walkway should be built over Cooper. However, he sees the shrubbery idea as an immediate solution.

He admitted the traffic lights have not worked out as planned. "We thought with traffic lights installed, drivers wouldn't want to use Cooper Street anymore."

UTA paid \$51,862 for the lighting

system installed in spring 1975. Wetsel estimates the shrubbery would cost \$125,000 if approved.

Traffic director Loggins recommends depressing Cooper. Then overpass walkways could be built as close as possible to ground level, he said.

"We need to quit sitting on things. Something needs to be done," Loggins said.

He added getting all three factions— administration, city and state—to agree on a compromise is the main problem.

District engineer J.R. Stone of the Texas Highways and Transportation Department agrees.

"Once, the state recommended fences bordering Cooper with openings where students would have to cross at the crosswalks," he said this week.

Wetsel vetoed that plan but subsequently suggested a fence down the middle of Cooper with openings for cars and pedestrians to pass through.

The city and state did not like that idea. The city was interested in a tunnel as an inexpensive alternative.

Arlington said there should be six lanes. The state said four lanes. The state said room was needed for utilities. The city said population growth must be taken into account. Stalemate.

A plan to lower Cooper underground much like Loggins' suggestion met financial doom when the state and university could not ante up the money.

But until a major, feasible plan to renovate Cooper or close it down is made Wetsel says temporary measures must be taken.

