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Tuesday, January 09, 2007

Uniontown studies synchronizing all traffic lights in city

By Steve Ferris, Herald-Standard
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Representatives from the state Department of Transportation and the National Road Heritage Corridor met with Uniontown City Council on Friday to discuss a report detailing concerns about the timing of traffic signals downtown and recommendations for changes.

Donna Holdorf of the National Road board said that PennDOT prepared the report at the request of the ReVITALize Downtown Uniontown group, which is looking for ways to attract more businesses to downtown.

Traffic flow and pedestrian safety were among the concerns raised by the group, Holdorf said.

PennDOT traffic engineer Barry Lyons said vehicles that catch all three traffic lights on Main Street when they are green often reach speeds of 45 to 50 mph when they pass the last light at Main and Morgantown streets.

Holdorf said even school buses speed down Main Street and look like "yellow flashes" by the time they pass in front of her office in the Fayette Chamber of Commerce building.

Lyons said PennDOT does not own or operate the lights, but issues permits that regulate how they operate. PennDOT sets the timing and then turns the lights over to the city, and the city now owns and is responsible for maintaining and setting the timing, he said.

The timing or synchronization of the lights was last adjusted four or five years ago, and they were set to keep traffic flowing

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at 25 miles per hour, but the timing has slipped since then, Lyons said.

The timers on the lights are 12 years old, and some no longer work properly, he said.

Both Lyons and Holdorf said they don't want Main Street traffic to have to stop at Gallatin Avenue, Beeson Avenue and again at Morgantown Street.

However, Mayor Jim Sileo said members of the National Road board have told him that they want traffic to stop at each light.

City electrician Ron Varndell said he'll synchronize the lights any way council wants them set.

He said a hardware synchronization system works the best, but is very expensive.

At the suggestion of Councilman Blair Jones, Uniontown Redevelopment Authority Executive Director William Long said he would find out if community development block grant funds can be used on traffic signals.

Varndell said federal regulations require that signals be set to keep traffic flowing, so gas isn't wasted in vehicles while idling at red lights.

He cautioned that a long red light at Main Street and Gallatin Avenue could back up traffic past the courthouse.

Police, not traffic lights, control the speed of traffic, Varndell said.

Police Chief Kyle Sneddon said it is difficult to enforce the speed limit on Main Street because there are no places for officers to park their patrol cars.

Gary Gearing, owner of the Fayette Bank Building on West Main Street, said his building has been struck by vehicles that can "easily hit 50" along that stretch of the road.

He suggested setting the lights so traffic has to stop at one of three intersections.

Raymond Polaski, executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, said 750 people work downtown, but downtown is not pedestrian-friendly.

"It's very pedestrian-unfriendly to use the traffic signals downtown," Polaski said. "You've got to convince incoming businesses that friendliness exists."

Sneddon said several other intersections also need improvements.

Mall and hospital traffic causes backups at the intersection of Route 21 and Easy Street, he said.

He also said PennDOT made the city remove a sign prohibiting left turns from Morgantown Street to South Street and another sign that prohibited left turns onto North Mount Vernon Avenue.

Sneddon reported a 20 percent increase in accidents at the intersection of South and Morgantown streets since the sign was removed.

Lyons went to outline four recommendations for improving traffic flow and pedestrian safety.

The first was adjusting signal controllers at the three intersections along Main Street.

The second was adding four seconds to the flashing "Don't Walk" pedestrian signal at Main and Morgantown streets so the signal lasts 11 seconds. Currently, pedestrians have seven seconds of "Walk" and seven seconds of flashing "Don't Walk." Adding four seconds to the "Don't Walk" would require reducing the green light on Main Street by four seconds.

The third recommendation is for the city to install a flashing "Signal Ahead" warning sign near the courthouse before the Main Street-Gallatin Avenue intersection.

The fourth concerns the Gallatin Avenue-Church Street intersection. Lyons suggested installing a "Signal Ahead" sign on Church Street before the intersection, adding one or two seconds to the time when all the lights are red with equal reductions to the green lights, adding five seconds of green light time on Church Street with equal reductions in red light time on Gallatin Avenue, and adding a second overhead signal on the mast arm for the Church Street approach.

Sileo said that at least some of the recommendations will be carried out.

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