

TIA report suggests traffic signal timing improvements at Dakota

By Nicole Tuttle , For The Macomb Daily
09/22/17



Amber Markel, the mother of Victoria Cartwright, spoke before the Macomb Township Board of Trustees several times in 2016 and early 2017. She advocated for better lighting and other improvements to the area of roadway where Cartwright was struck and killed. Markel has continued to advocate for children in the Chippewa Valley School district since her daughter's death. Nicole Tuttle — For the Macomb Daily



Dakota High School student Victoria Cartwright, age 14, was killed in a traffic accident near Dakota. Her mother, Amber Markel, afterwards advocated for better lighting in the area. Macomb Daily File Photo

Instead of planning to celebrate her daughter Victoria Cartwright's 16th birthday this November, mother Amber Markel is advocating for traffic safety and finding other ways to make a difference to Dakota High School teens.

It is one of the ways Markel said she has worked to cope with her daughter's death.

"There've been a lot of different ways, and honestly, a lot of tears," Markel said. "I talk to my husband and family and friends. I mostly try to stay focused on improving things."

At the age of 14 and in November 2016, the same month that she would have turned 15, Dakota sophomore Victoria Cartwright was struck by a Jeep Wrangler driven by a then 16-year-old girl on Heydenreich Road near Vine Drive. The driver and her then 16-year-old passenger were going to Dakota High School at the time, as was Cartwright. Cartwright was crossing the street from the west side of Heydenreich to the east when she was struck. Cartwright later died at Henry Ford Macomb Hospital in Clinton Township. No charges were filed.

Markel led a crusade before the Macomb Township Board of Trustees multiple times after Cartwright's death, asking the board to consider better lighting for the area and other roadway related improvements. On Jan. 11, the board approved streetlights for the area.

Eighty-seven streetlights were installed centered around 21 Mile Road and Heydenreich, two miles from Hall Road up to 22 Mile Road on Heydenreich and two miles from Card Road to Romeo Plank along 21 Mile Road according to Macomb Township Engineer James Van Tiflin. Existing utility poles were utilized and cost to the township was \$72,896.59. Annual lamp charge was \$14,381.97. Sidewalks were installed on 21 Mile Road and Heydenreich near a cluster of Chippewa Valley schools, including Dakota, over the summer, according to Van Tiflin.

As she lives on Heydenreich, Markel said she was able to observe many of the improvements as they occurred.

“It helps a lot to see the kids walking by, to see parents walking by and using the sidewalk,” Markel said.

On Sept. 11, the Transportation Improvement Association (TIA) made a presentation to the Chippewa Valley Schools Board of Education to discuss its study of traffic and pedestrian safety conducted at Dakota and the surrounding school campuses. Chippewa Valley Schools Superintendent Ron Roberts said that the TIA made some short-term and long-term suggestions for the district.

TIA Chief Executive Officer Jim Santilli said that administration of the school district contacted the TIA requesting the review of traffic flow at Dakota and the Dakota Ninth Grade Center, a plan which was expanded on Dec. 14, 2016, to include nearby Seneca Middle School and Cheyenne Elementary. TIA engineers and data collection technicians spent multiple months reviewing the site and collecting data for the report, according to Santilli.

“Overall, the area is safe. However, the Transportation Improvement Association determined signal timing modifications could potentially improve traffic flow. These timings were based off the data collected, site reviews, and a computer simulation. TIA presented the suggestions to the Macomb County Department of Roads,” Santilli said.

The department received an unofficial copy of the TIA recommendations and are reviewing them to see if there are any related to the department of roads, according to Santilli.

“TIA looked at the three signals around the school. MCDR will be looking to see what would be the optimal solution for the corridors, so that making changes near the school does not cause any potential safety or efficiency concerns at other signals along these corridors,” Santilli said.

The TIA reviewed the traffic crash history and existing signal timings. It further collected vehicle and pedestrian counts including turning movement counts, and conducted site observations, Santilli said.

“The safe and efficient flow of vehicles and pedestrians was the primary focus. This included looking at the use of pedestrian crosswalks. Overall, an overwhelming majority of students were using the crosswalks. Furthermore, the area has the highest number of crossing guards the TIA has ever seen,” Santilli said.

Macomb County Department of Roads Deputy Director of Traffic and Operations John Abraham said that the department of roads has been closely involved with the school district and reduced speeds in the school zone from 35 to 30, per new legislation, in January. School speed limit timings were adjusted to reflect times before when high school begins through when elementary school begins, and similarly during dismissal times, Abraham confirmed. Pavement markings were refreshed before the school year began, Abraham said.

Santilli further said that the department of roads has participated with other partners to have pedestrian crossings at the 21 Mile Road and Heydenreich intersection, and has completed pedestrian traffic signal work at the crosswalks.

“The intersection and road segment related crashes are not higher than are seen at other locations. The majority of the crashes are the result of ‘human error,’ not the road design. This is consistent with what is seen throughout the state and nation,” Santilli said.

The TIA is in the process of creating an informational card for students and a video that can be shown occasionally during morning announcements, according to Santilli.

Markel said that she has been in touch with a counselor at Dakota to express interest in working with a local therapist for student grief and trauma support and recovery as a pilot program. Markel said she further suggested a protocol system to assist parents in helping their children deal with grief or trauma. Markel has a background of working in the community of mental health.