

Q. Why is the county spending money working on the State Highway 129 road bank?

A. After any major accident the county tries to see what we might be able to do to improve safety, no matter where the accident is. Most times it usually is driver error by one party or the other. That was apparently the case in the accident with a fatality near the intersection of Hwy 19/129 N and Pat Colwell Rd. a few months ago. However, we decided that if we could acquire R/W, we could improve the sight distance and that might help drivers coming from the North to see the intersection sooner.

Q Do you always get involved with traffic accident roadway evaluations?

A. Usually not. But in this case not only did I know the lady who lost her life in the accident, I knew this intersection had always been an issue with accidents and wondered if there was anything else that could be done to improve safety.

Q. Were you responsible for the improvements already done to this intersection?

A. Soon after I was elected commissioner the first time back in 2001, there was a serious accident at this intersection. Once we investigated accident data, it turned out that nearly 75% of the accidents with injuries in the entire county occurred between Blairsville City Limits and Gum Log Road on US 19/129 N (Murphy Hwy.), and most of the accidents were around the Pat Haralson/ Pat Colwell Rd. intersections. So I may have gotten the ball started, but GDOT was responsible for the project and its supervision.

Q. Many improvements were made to these intersections a couple of years ago by the state. What was your involvement?

A. Once we determined the number of accidents to be so high, I contacted GDOT to ask what could be done to improve safety on this stretch of roadway. At the time, there was some federal "safety program money" and the state began the process of applying for it. However, by the time all engineering was completed, r/w purchased, a historic rock wall, TVA lake property and stream bank restoration was involved, it ended up taking about 7 years to get the money approved for a \$ 2 million project and get it completed.

Q. What was done to improve this intersection?

A. A lot was done. A center turn lane was added and the entrance from Pat Haralson Rd. was widened with a right turn lane. Then a right turn lane was added to Pat Colwell Rd. While we had requested a traffic light, the traffic count did not justify one, so that has been a disappointment to many church goers on Sunday.

However, these changes have made major safety improvements to this section of roadway. There are not near as many accidents along this section of roadway as there used to be and even though we may not remember, having these turn lanes has really helped reduce accidents and congestion.

Q. Don't you think that a traffic light at the Hwy 129/ Pat Colwell intersection would make this area safer?

A. That is really a question for GDOT to answer. According to their guidelines, there is not enough accident data or traffic counts to warrant a traffic light. They tell me that sometimes, if you place a traffic light at an intersection, especially on a rural section of highway, it can sometimes cause more accidents than it prevents. It would definitely make it easier for church traffic to get onto the Murphy highway. GDOT will reexamine this intersection next year for traffic light consideration.

Q. We can already tell that when the county recently graded the road bank back, it has really improved sight distance, but when will we get a turn lane onto Pat Colwell Rd. from Hwy 129 N?

A, It could be done by the time you read this. GDOT engineers came up to visit the site with me a couple of months ago. They agreed that if we would handle the sight distance problem, they would try to find a crew to come make a turn lane. They began work there last week and if the weather cooperates, they should have the turn lane paved and working soon.

I want to especially thank GDOT for all the assistance they have been to me and the county. It often seems that it takes a long time to make something happen and it often does, but they have definitely been a friend to Union County and have put the rush on this turn lane.

Lamar Paris
Union County Commissioner