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Complete Streets to focus on safety

By: Alisha Semchuck



PALMDALE - Public safety is a main concern for city officials and the force behind their Complete Streets project, beginning with an overhaul of East Avenue R between Sierra Highway and 25th Street East.

Walkers, joggers, cyclists and even motorists will benefit from the safety measures put in place

by the design that revamps the road, according to Mike Behen, Palmdale's transportation manager. Once finished, the arterial will have curbs, gutters and a sidewalk, he said.

Also, Behen said, the current six-lane route, with three lanes in each direction, will be reduced to four lanes, two in each direction.

A workshop, Tuesday night at the Chimbole Cultural Center, was meant to inform the city's residents about the Complete Streets project - an overhaul of certain neighborhood roads and walkways in the city.

Behen could not explain why a maximum of eight community residents showed up Tuesday night at the Chimbole Cultural Center.

Behen stressed the significance of the Complete Streets project as the city's attempt to make all forms of local mobility - in cars, on bicycles, in wheelchairs or on foot - safer for a better quality of life.

While a PowerPoint presentation reviewed the various types of Complete Streets, Behen focused on the Avenue R project.

"Avenue R is a Complete Street project the city is processing right now," Behen said.

He said Palmdale received a grant of \$595,000 from the state of California, precisely through the Active Transportation Program, Cycle 2, for the street facelift.

Behen said \$535,000 of the grant went to the project consultant and \$60,000 was set aside for city staff reimbursement.

"We're approximately one year into the project," Behen said.

"We are redesigning the street to be consistent with Complete Streets concepts. Right now, it's a major arterial with six lanes - three in each direction. We're going to reduce that to four lanes - two in each direction. With that extra right-of-way, we're putting in curb, gutter and sidewalks. We're also putting in bike lanes."

That will improve safety and provide the opportunity for all types of transportation modes, Behen said.

Joel Plantinga, the lead pastor at Desert Winds Community Church, skipped church just weeks before the holiday to attend the Complete Streets workshop.

"The holiday means a lot to me, but my neighborhood means a lot to me, too," Plantinga said.

Desert Winds Church is on 13th Street East, a block north of Avenue R.

Conditions along that street pose a risk to the parishioners as well as folks who live in the vicinity, according to the pastor.

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"We can do things to lessen the risk," he said.

"There's design standards to lessen the risk - things like curb, gutters and sidewalks, most importantly separated by bike lanes," Behen said.

At the mention of bike lanes, Plantinga perked up.

"I'm an avid cyclist," he said. "I rode my bike across the whole state of Iowa." Plantinga said this year he hasn't been on his bike much. But, he added, "I have ridden my bike to church from my house, and I live on the west side of town.

"It's definitely not a safe commute by bike. Some parts are (safe), but other parts are not. There are spots on Avenue R where there is no sidewalk."

Students also walk along the dirt road shoulder to and from school.

"From where our church is at 13th Street (East), it's very dangerous (for cars) to turn onto Avenue R," Plantinga said.

Left turns are "very dangerous," Plantinga said. "It's a blind turn, it really is. And a right turn is tricky. It's a matter of time before there's a major accident at that intersection.

"I'm grateful to the city for its work on this, and I'm hopeful that the higher powers that be can come through for our city. We've encouraged our entire congregation to write to (Rep.) Steve Knight and (Assemblyman) Tom Lackey."

Although this is a city project relying on state funds, Plantinga said, "Congressmen tend to have a lot of pull with the people who are deciding whether to move forward or not."

In the simplest of terms, the PowerPoint defined Complete Streets as "streets for everyone, no matter who they are or how they travel."

Complete Streets are reportedly "safe, comfortable and convenient."

An ideal Complete Streets Policy, according to the PowerPoint, includes a vision, specifies all users, applies to new and retrofit projects, makes any exceptions specific, encourages street connectivity and is adoptable by all agencies to cover all roads among other criteria.

A description board set up for viewing by workshop participants showed examples of different layouts for Complete Streets.

Complete Streets do not all look the same, or include the same elements, the description board stated.

They are designed based on context, to adequately accommodate the various types of users expected in the area.

The first example showed an urban corridor. Streets often provide dedicated on-street space for biking, and sometimes include painted or physical separation from motor vehicles.

The second example, along shopping streets, stated that the emphasis often is placed on pedestrians, encouraging them to move through, linger and visit businesses.

No. 3 focused on suburban corridors "where destinations are far apart. A street may only need a side path to accommodate people walking and biking."

Example No. 4 was set near schools. Street typically emphasizes pedestrian safety with planted buffers, sidewalks and highly visible crosswalks.

The concept, according to city staff, is that Complete Streets will improve and expand "transportation options" in Palmdale.

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