

Local Officials Resolve to Make Culver's Intersection Safer



Thad Ash, Door County highway commissioner, said this intersection is one of the most dangerous in the county. With backing from the Highway Safety Commission, he's pressing the county for funding to make improvements.

by DEBRA FITZGERALD
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Motorists quickly learn they're in for a wait if they're trying to head north on Highway 42/57 from Gordon Road/County BB at the Culver's restaurant intersection. Those who feel they can't wait take risks when patience runs out. As a result, the intersection is fraught with near misses, horn blowing and so far this year, four accidents.

"Sit out there one day, and see how many times the hair on the back of your neck stands up," said Thad Ash, Door County highway commissioner.

87%

of Door County crashes are caused by motorists who live on the peninsula.

— Wisconsin Department of Transportation

Ash was speaking during last week's Door County Highway Safety Commission meeting. The commission meets quarterly and brings together representatives from the county, city and state. The Gordon Road intersection in Sevastopol was the topic that took up the majority of last week's discussion.

Even though the intersection isn't within the City of Sturgeon Bay, city engineer Chad Shefchik said he fields a couple of calls a week from people who believe the intersection is dangerous and want a solution.

"That is one of our most dangerous intersections in our county," Ash said. "I would sleep better knowing I tried to fix it."

After a lengthy discussion, the commission unanimously approved creating a resolution to state its position on the intersection being of very high concern and to ask the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) to work with Ash on locally funded options to restrict northbound, left-turn movements from County BB/Gordon Road to the highway.

A Roundabout Solution

The resolution also asked WisDOT for a long-term solution for a roundabout at the intersection. That suggestion came from

Chief Deputy Pat McCarty of the Sturgeon Bay Sheriff's Office.

A proposed child care center, currently moving through a rezoning process, is being planned for Gordon Road just west of the Culver's development. Commercial and residential development are also slated to begin next year along the highway less than a mile north of the intersection.

"Development along that corridor is only going to continue, and our traffic volumes are only going to grow," McCarty said, and roundabouts "have been proven for accident reduction and traffic flow."

WisDOT's Mason Simmons - who was filling in at the Highway Safety Commission meeting for the state's usual Door County representative, Randy Asman - said a decision on a roundabout is made at a higher level than his office.

"It's not fully up to me that I can pull out of a pot of money for a \$2 million roundabout," he said. "No one from my office can make that call."

The state doesn't have a petition process for specific traffic-control measures, but the county can still ask for a roundabout, Simmons said.

"Any recommendation would only be considered after we have funding," he said. "But you can make that now."

The need for education was also stressed. Eighty-seven percent of Door County crashes are caused by motorists who live on the peninsula. That percentage is even higher for the Gordon Road and Highway 42/57 intersection, said Randy Wiesinger, a liaison/consultant for WisDOT's Bureau of Transportation Safety Law Enforcement.

"We can't engineer our way out of this," Wiesinger said. (See the related sidebar story about education efforts.)

Crash Stats at Gordon Road and Highway 42/57

There have been four crashes at the intersection this year, according to McCarty. Three of those have occurred since the last time the commission met May 5.

Door County Board supervisor Hugh Zettel, who represents the east side of Sevastopol, attended the meeting with data he collected provided by McCarty. There have been 22 accidents and one fatality at the intersection since 2015. Almost half the accidents (10) were caused by motorists attempting to turn left from Gordon Road onto the highway to head north. The second-highest number (six) were motorists traveling north trying to turn left (west) onto Gordon Road and being rear-ended.

Zettel suggested a short-term solution of posting reflective delineators at the intersection to prevent traffic from heading north on the highway from Gordon Road until the intersection can be reengineered.

WisDOT's Take on the Likelihood of Improvements

Simmons said WisDOT is paying attention to the intersection, but it has funding right now for a high-crash area in southern Door County at County H and Stone Road - not the Gordon Road intersection.

Simmons said communities in counties across the state are competing for limited

continued on page 7



Over the past 10 years, there have been 9,413 total crashes in Door County, resulting in 33 fatalities and 1,925 injuries. Shown here are the locations of the fatal crashes. Transportation and law-enforcement officials say that education to change motorists' behavior needs to play a larger role than it currently does in preventing accidents. Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Safety

Door County Crashes By the Numbers

	Jan. 1 - July 31 2022	Jan 1 - July 31 2022	% Change
Fatalities	1	0	100%
Serious Injury	9	7	29%
Minor Injury	43	28	54%
Possible Injury	30	18	67%
Property Damage Only	380	332	14%
Deer Only	154	145	6%
Total (minus deer)	309	240	29%

Go South to the Roundabout to Go North

Education efforts needed to help change local driving behaviors

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Preventing car crashes means, in part, engineering safe roads and intersections. Law enforcement helps by writing tickets to try to change motorists' behavior.

But there's a third leg of that crash-prevention stool called education, and that's often missing, said Randy Wiesinger, a liaison/consultant for WisDOT's Bureau of Transportation Safety Law Enforcement.

Wiesinger said the data show that 87% of motorists involved in local crashes are Door County residents.

"Many of us have a perception that the crash rate goes up because of visitors," he said. "That's not who's crashing. It's 87% residents in Door County, and higher at that intersection."

"That intersection" is where Gordon Road/County BB intersects Highway 42/57 in Sevastopol. It was the main topic of discussion last week during the Door County Highway Safety Commission's quarterly meeting. Almost half the accidents at the intersection happen when motorists traveling eastbound on Gordon Road are attempting a left turn onto the highway.

Instead, Wiesinger said, those motorists should be educated to automatically head south on the highway

to the roundabout, and then swing back around to head north.

"We need to educate the residents of Door County," he said. "If you want to be safe for you and your family and friends, don't turn left and go north. Go south to the roundabout."

Officials surmise that's not happening because local residents - waylaid by the additional traffic and longer travel times - become frustrated and impatient. Higher traffic volumes, however, are just a fact of life during the tourist season, and Jenny Austin with the Wisconsin State Patrol said education efforts can focus in general on the need for adjusted time management.

"When traffic volumes are heavy, you have to allow extra time," she said. "You have to plan that into your trip. You've got to leave earlier."

Door County's Most Dangerous Intersections

Gordon Road/County BB and Highway 42/57 are eighth on that list

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A lot of attention has been given to the traffic-safety issues at the intersection of Gordon Road/County BB and Highway 42/57 in the Town of Sevastopol, where the Culver's restaurant is located.

There's good reason for that, said Mason Simmons, a traffic-safety engineer with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. Public complaints about the intersection are lodged regularly with the County of Door, City of Sturgeon Bay, Town of Sevastopol - and with Simmons himself.

"It does help," he said. "There are thousands of intersections. At the same time, we need to follow state and federal guidelines. There's only so much money. We're making sure we're prioritizing those funds appropriately."

It's Simmons' job to constantly monitor all roads in Wisconsin. One of the tools he uses to do that is the Safety Certification Worksheet Information sheet, which rates the safety levels of traffic trouble-spot areas. The sheet crunches numbers based on criteria such as the type of road, speed limit, crashes, injury rates, OWIs (operating while intoxicated) and other factors.

The latest sheet, updated July 6 and shared with the Peninsula Pulse, shows 24 intersections in Door County that are considered trouble spots. They range from 0.15 on the low end, to the most dangerous intersection at 5.82.

The top two - 5.82 for Highway 57 and Stone Road, and 5.06 for Highway 57 and County H, both in Southern Door - have been approved for federal safety dollars to fund improvements. Those two roads also rank in the top 5% of the most dangerous intersections in the state and are the only two intersections in Door County to make that statewide list.

Improvements for those two intersections are currently in the design phase and could cost between \$1 million and \$2 million per intersection. Those wouldn't be scheduled for construction until 2025 or 2026, and a public-involvement phase would be part of the process.

On that Safety Certification Worksheet Information for Door County, the intersection at Gordon Road/County BB and Highway 42/57 rates .086 - or the eighth most dangerous within the county.

"When we ask for federal dollars, they ask, 'Why do you need the money?'" Simmons said. "It's number eight on the list. What are you doing for numbers one through seven?"

Still, Simmons said it's not impossible to get funding for a fix at the intersection.

"I'm working on justifications for it," he said.

In addition to the top two, the intersections that are rated higher, or more dangerous, than Gordon Road/County BB and Highway 42/57 are Highway 57 and South Cloverleaf Road (3.39), Highway 42 and County T (2.04), Highway 42 and County I (1.39), Highway 57 and County Q (1.12), and Highway 42/57 and County MM (0.86, the same as Gordon Road/County BB and Highway 42/57).