

Nightmare on West Napa St.

sub: New left turn lane causes traffic woes

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By Neal Ross

The road to hell isn't the only one paved with good intentions, as West Napa Street commuters discovered following last week's addition of a westbound left-turn-only lane in front of the new Bonanza Ford dealership.

"The blunt fact is, we did something that we thought would improve the traffic, and it didn't work out that way," City Engineer John Bonnoitt said Wednesday.

Sonoma motorist John Merritt was even more blunt. Gesturing across the intersection at Riverside Drive, where the two lanes seem to squeeze into one, Merritt said, "It's an accident waiting to happen."

Caltrans officials said the turn lane - striped on the roadway, but unmarked by signs either on the roadside or the West Napa Street/Highway 12 traffic signal - will be removed, restoring the intersection to its former state.

"We are aware of it, we are in the process of getting it corrected, but I can't say for sure to give you an exact date of when that work will be accomplished," Caltrans spokeswoman Julie Gum said Wednesday.

Originally, the middle lane served as an eastbound merge for drivers turning onto West Napa Street from busy Sonoma Highway. But that was changed as one of the city's conditions of approval for the recently-completed Bonanza Ford project.

Bonnoitt said a traffic study, commissioned as part of the project's environmental impact report, recommended adding the left-turn lane into Bonanza Ford and widening the road in order to relieve anticipated traffic problems. Since the work was slated for a state highway, Caltrans had the final say on the matter.

"Bonanza Ford's civil engineer designed it, (and) Caltrans approved those plans," Bonnoitt said. "That doesn't mean they're culpable - we're the ones who insisted it go in there."

Project costs were borne by the car dealership, and estimated by owner Gus Shubel as "in the thousands of dollars." But Bonnoitt said that Caltrans would pick up the restoration tab.

As of yesterday's presstime, the lane addition hadn't caused any accidents. But complaints about the intersection have been pouring into Caltrans, Sonoma City Hall, county supervisor Mike Cale's office and the Sonoma Police Department, according to city planning director Mike Moore. Police Capt. Robert Wedell said officers have been stopping motorists to warn them of the hazard.

"Very few people have been pulled over, (and) we've not issued any citations as far as I know," Wedell said yesterday. "The markings have been really problematic for the flow of traffic - in heavy congestion, you wouldn't be able to see it."

Bonnoitt added that, as far as he's concerned, the issue has been a waste of time and money.

"(Bonanza Ford) had to do some pavement widening and some striping, and it's going right in the garbage can," Bonnoitt said. "The main headache is I feel like we've forced one of our business owners ... to do some work, with all the best intentions in mind, that turned out not to be a good idea."