

# Safety project to revamp Laurel St.

*Traffic patterns*  
Improvements include limiting left turns, new traffic signals

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SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — The remains of hundreds of crashes are evident on Laurel Street: sign poles bent by skidding vehicles and curbs blackened by the tires of out-of-control cars.

And the memory of one partic-

ularly scary wreck, which sent a vehicle into the side of the Fosters Freeze at Laurel and Cedar streets, sticks in the mind of Valerie Abbott, the manager of the restaurant.

"It's a very dangerous intersection," Abbott said.

Crews are slated to begin work this week on a two-month safety

project on the stretch of Laurel Street between Front and Chestnut streets that will eliminate some of the sketchiest left turns while adding left-turn signals at other intersections.

"It makes it safer for bicyclists and pedestrians crossing the street," said Chris Schneider, assistant director of public works

in Santa Cruz. "There's been some accidents related to these issues."

There were 121 collisions on that section of Laurel Street from January 2004 to last month, according to police spokesman Zach Friend. Most of the crashes were non-injury, though at least a couple

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involved bicyclists and two others involved buses, he said.

"We totally support the idea of traffic improvements," Friend said.

Two distinct changes will occur in the corridor:

■ Crews will build traffic islands to eliminate left turns at the intersections of Laurel and Washington and Cedar streets. The barriers will also prevent traffic on the side streets from crossing Laurel, meaning motorists will only be allowed to turn right at those intersections.

"That has been — particularly at Cedar Street — a safety issue in the past," Schneider said. "Now people are either going to have to go to Center Street or Pacific Avenue to make a left turn."

■ Eight new traffic signal poles will go up where Laurel intersects Pacific Avenue and Front, Center and Chestnut streets. The new lights will allow motorist to make protected left turns "where you get a green arrow," Schneider said. "Instead of just making a left turn you have to wait for the green arrow."

Most of the \$780,000 project is funded by a federal safety grant. The city chipped in about \$120,000 for the improvements.

"I think it's great they're doing something," said Laura Scribner, supervisor at the Loudon Nelson Center, near the intersection of Laurel and Center. "There are a fair number of accidents or near-misses on that corner. ... We hear squealing and near-misses."

Laurel Street has been prone to fender-benders for years, police said. Also, the side streets crossing Laurel are backed up with vehicles trying to turn left onto or cross the thoroughfare during the summer, the holidays or even a busy weekend.

After studying the history of accidents



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A Cedar Street driver, at left, waits to make a left turn onto Laurel Street on Tuesday. Once traffic islands are installed, a left turn will no longer be permitted at the intersection.

on Laurel, the city applied for grants in 2006 to help cover the cost of the safety improvements, according to Schneider.

"In evaluating collisions, we rate the top 10, the top 20," he said. "We look for funding programs to help resolve these issues."

The funding came through last year and construction started Tuesday. However, the rainy weather quickly sidelined the crew from Marina-based Collins Electric, which won the city contract. Work is expected to resume later this week and

continue, weather-permitting, until the end of April, Schneider said.

"Now's kind of a good time of year for this time of work," he said. "We're after the holiday season but before the summer."

The construction will cause intermittent lane closures, mostly 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. Monday-Friday. The construction crew, headed by project manager Bobby Scardina, will work to keep traffic flowing during the work.

"We're not tearing the whole street up,"

Schneider said. "It's mostly work that occurs kind of at the corners of these intersections."

Those who work along Laurel Street said they're excited about the construction, but are looking forward to the finished product.

"We think ultimately the project is going to be safer for us," Abbott said.

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