Too much traffic for this old town

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SANTA CRUZ — Does the city hire consultants to design traps for motorists? Or does it engineer its own traffic jams?

You can't blame drivers for asking. Especially those who have just waited for the light to turn green only to find it's impossible to go because the cross traffic is backed up through the intersection and as soon as the cross traffic moves, the light has turned red again and somebody's honking and. . .

Traffic is so bad the police say it takes them 20 minutes to get across town to a call — 30 minutes if they use red lights and siren! That's a joke. But it's no laughing matter.

Police, firefighters and ambulance drivers often have to crawl through the city in a race of life and death. So, when asked which is the worst intersection in town, ambulance company manager Bob Zuckswert and Fire Department Division Chiefs Bill Reedy and Eldon Nagel agree: "They're all bad."

Vice Mayor John Laird boiled over when somebody mentioned traffic lights at Tuesday night's City Council meeting. "Count me in with the rest of the ticked-off drivers," he says. And Mike Rotkin assured the council the citizenry would build it a shrine if it solved the snafu at Soquel Avenue and Morrissey Boulevard.

Now, somebody's got to be blamed for the tangled mess out there.

The city traffic engineer? That's Jim Helmer, but the problem was out of hand before he stepped in and nobody's pointing a finger at him, regardless.

Most people agree there's just too much traffic for this old town. "We're not unique," Helmer says. "Throughout California, the older cities that already are filled out are facing the problem of congested streets."

Statistics best show what's been happening on city streets. In 1970, an average of 4,200 vehicles per day traveled on Chestnut Street below Mission; in 1982, the average was 8,200. The 1970 average on Mission Street near Bay was 17,500; the 1982 average was 29,500. The 1970 average at River Street north of Highway 1 was 7,500; in 1982 it was 18,400.

The figures for Soquel Avenue near Morrissey were 20,000 in 1970 and 24,300 in 1982. "It's bumper-to-bumper. There's been no room to grow there," says Helmer.

Much of the overflow from Soquel Avenue has gone south to Murray Street or north to Highway 1, says Helmer. To wit: The average daily traffic count on Highway 1 south of Morrissey in 1979 was 58,000. In 1982 it was 72,000.

With narrow streets that can't be widened, Helmer must look to band-aid approaches: better timing of traffic signals, synchronization of signals so they change simultaneously and the

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creation of more one-way streets.

The city hired a consultant, Ruth and Going, Inc. of San Jose, to study the city's 37 traffic signals and overall traffic circulation.

The consultants list the following as the most troublesome intersections:

- River Street and Highway 1
- Soquel Avenue, Morrissey Boulevard and Water Street
- Mission and Bay streets
- Mission Street, Highway1 and Chestnut Street
- Ocean and Water streets

So far they're on the money.

Surprisingly, however, the consultants say every intersection in the city is within acceptable federal traffic flow standards.

Only the River Street/Highway 1 and Soquel/Morrissey/Water intersections rank low by those standards when comparing volume to capacity.

They fall into a category, defined as "Conditions approach unstable flow, with tolerable operating speeds being maintained though considerably affected by changes in operating conditions. Fluctuation in volume and temporary restrictions may cause substantial drops in operating speeds. Drivers have little freedom to maneuver, and comfort and convenience are low, but conditions can be tolerated for short periods of time."

They're losing some credibility here.

Most of the problems occur during the morning and evening drives to and from work. The report shows that average speed along Soquel Avenue between Front Street and Morrissey in the afternoon is 10.7 mph. Average sped is 12.5 mph along Water Street and 12.8 on Mission-Water streets between River Street and Highway 1.

The study proposes a number of solutions, including redesign of the Highway 1 and River Street. This summer, Caltrans plans to widen that intersection, making three through lanes in each direction on Highway 1 and two left turn lanes from River onto southbound Highway 1 and two left turn lanes from Highway 1 westbound onto River (toward town.)

The study also says the city should consider making Water Street one-way westbound from the intersection and the west approach leg of Soquel Avenue a one-way street eastbound, either to Poplar or Seabright Avenues.

The stoplight at Soquel/Morrissey/Water currently has four separate phases. The result, says Helmer, is that 75 percent of the traffic is stopped at any one time. The consultants recommend one phase be eliminated. Helmer says the intersection need left turn lanes, like the Ocean and Water intersection. If that could be worked out, he says, signals could be synchronized with those at Hagemann Avenue and Park Way.

Councilmember Laird is screaming for synchronization of traffic signals. That may be the most popular-ever political stance, being that no elected official so far has called for eliminating all taxes.

"Synchronization is a major way of reducing traffic problems," says Helmer. But, he cautions, the study indicates only a few avenues warrant synchronization.

So far, the city has only two synchronized corridors — Laurel Street at Front, Pacific and Center, and Mission Street at Walnut, Laurel and Bay.

The city, Helmer says, was one of the first on the West Coast to install a wireless system on Laurel Street. Those lights are synchronized from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. for cars travelling 22 or 23 mph, says Helmer.

"Laurel Street traffic is moving more efficiently. There are 30 percent fewer stops, higher average speed, lesser pollutants and better travel time for cross-town trips," Helmer says.

Helmer would like to see the stop lights sychronized on Water Street at River, Pacific and Center. Thousands of Santa Cruzans would like to see that, too.

The major problem of sychronizing lights along other streets, he says, is the distance between intersections. "Different driving habits result in drivers arriving at different times. Crosswalks, left and right turns and driveways all result in fluctuation of speed.

If Laird is yelling about traffic congestion, it's probably OK with Helmer since he says he's wondered why past City Councils have not made traffic a top priorety.

The council Tuesday night appointed a new Traffic Commission and charged them to come up by January with an action plan for the future.

If they don't get stuck in traffic.