

They came, they talked and they won a traffic stoplight

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SANTA CRUZ — They came single-minded and determined, and they won.

Men, women and children packed the City Council chamber Tuesday to convince the council to put a stoplight at a dangerous intersection at Ocean and Kennan streets before someone gets killed there.

The council sided with the residents, went against the advice of the city public works director and voted unanimously to build the stoplight next budget year, giving it a high priority on a long list of projects.

"We really can't put a price on public safety and human life," said Councilwoman Jane Weed.

Cost of the stoplight is \$120,000 to

\$150,000 plus another \$40,000 if it were synchronized with other Ocean Street lights.

The council also voted to immediately repaint the crosswalk stripes there, add a crosswalk sign and add street lights to the existing flashing lights.

Residents in the Ocean Street neighborhoods said cars on busy Ocean Street — heavy with commuter and beach traffic — simply do not stop for pedestrians in the Kennan Street crosswalk.

"I feel the city should either put in a stoplight there or issue a baseball bat to people crossing the street," resident Henry Dean said.

Fran Dean said she used to carry a stop sign with her to cross the street. Now, she sticks her hand out as she crosses to warn

cars.

"My husband thinks I'm crazy, but I put my hand out so people will stop for me," she said.

Mayor John Laird told the crowd he hoped they will "cut us some slack" when new taxes are considered to finance projects such as new stoplights. The city is running on an approximate \$750,000 annual deficit.

Parents said schoolchildren stick their hands out — like crossing guards — to tell drivers to stop as they cross.

A petition drive for the stoplight cause escalated into the formation of the Ocean Street Neighborhood Association. About 800 residents and merchants signed petitions.

The association, under the leadership of

new president Roberta Keuter, sent letters to residents, stating, "This increasingly unsafe crossing has been ignored for many years...."

About 32,000 cars per day travel Ocean Street, reported Public Works Director Larry Erwin. The numbers are higher during the summer.

Keuter wrote in a letter to the council, "Many children can be seen trying to bluff their way through the intersection on school mornings. I am sick with worry every time I see this sight. It is much worse for the seniors and handicapped."

Branciforte Elementary School crossing guard Debbie Mazzei also lobbied "for a safe way" for the children to cross.

Erwin had opposed the stoplight on the grounds it would cause cars to back up and

result in rear-end collisions.

Also, said Erwin, congestion and pollution would increase and drivers would take more shortcuts through neighborhoods.

Residents accused the Public Works Department of footdragging on safety improvements.

Erwin said in a report, "The Public Works Department sympathizes with all the residents who have difficulty crossing Ocean Street."

But Erwin said short-term, low-cost improvements other than a stoplight would do the job. Those improvements, recommended by the Traffic Commission, include highly-visible crosswalk paint, "keep clear" signs on the road, removal of parking spaces, more lights on the

flashing light that now marks the intersection and new rumble strips on the road.

The commission had endorsed the traffic light to be funded next budget year (July 1984-July 1985).

Residents contradicted Erwin, saying there had been accidents, documented or not.

Christine Richie said she had been hit, but not hurt, by a hit-and-run driver when she was pregnant.

Richie told the council, "Since I'm pregnant again, and I have a four-year-old son, I'm not about to risk crossing that street and getting hit again."

Councilwoman Mardi Wormhoudt said financing safety improvements has taken the city "an embarrassingly long time."