

Sears from A1

Object Removal project began with a \$150,000 Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) grant as part of the All Roads Transportation Safety fund to remove fixed objects on the sides of Sears Road. The decision to use the road, according to officials, was data-driven, based on crash history and recommended by ODOT as part of a cost-benefit analysis when distributing the grant.

At the Board of Commissioners meeting, Lane County Traffic Engineer Steve Gallup presented data that counted six crashes with fixed objects between 2010 and 2016. One of the crashes resulted in a fatality and the other five in injuries.

As part of its goal to reduce fatal and severe-injury collisions, the Lane County Board of Commissioners adopted a Transportation Safety Action Plan (TSAP) in 2017 to identify and address the greatest risks in the county. In this approach, fixed objects are identified as risk factors when they are within what is considered a “clear zone,” an otherwise unobstructed roadside area that drivers may use to pull to the side of the road or safely navigate and return from if they leave the roadway.

To achieve this goal, the Sears Road project states the need to cut 61 trees from the road at the cost of the grant amount, \$150,000.

During February’s public testimony, however, residents expressed dissatisfaction with the proposed cutting of 61 trees along the stretch, which in some cases provide protection from out-of-control vehicles.

“I don’t need a car at 55 miles an hour that loses control ... come crashing through my yard and hitting one of my kids,” said resident Jim Poetzl at the public hearing.

In the same meeting, South Lane County Fire and Rescue Division Chief Joe Raade spoke in his capacity as a first responder.

“I had the unfortunate experience of responding to all six of those emergencies up there,” he said.

On the fatality, Raade said, “He was dead before he left the road. I know that first-hand.”

Raade urged commissioners to look elsewhere for solutions.

“The accidents on our road are not related to the objects. They are related to the speed,” he said.

Raade also pointed to Mosby Creek Road and London Road as needing safety attention.

In a subsequent interview with *The Sentinel*, Raade explained his knowledge as a first responder to the accidents cited by the project report.

“All but one of those involved intoxicants,” he said.

According to Raade, regarding the fatality, an elderly passenger of the car had experienced a heart attack. His wife, who was driving, was distracted by the event and had a low-impact crash with a tree stump. No injuries resulted from the crash, but the passenger did not survive his medical emergency.

Community input at the July 29 meeting raised these concerns as well as a litany of suggestions which included reflectors on trees, curve warnings, more law enforcement and guard rails.

“We were able to identify a lot of alternatives,”



County Engineer Peggy Keppler (left) meets with local residents in the Community Center July 29 to discuss solutions to safety concerns on Sears Road.

Taylor said. “The challenge is, I don’t know if we can fund any of those alternatives.”

While many of the suggestions can be explored with other funding sources, little negotiation is left in the fixed-object removal grant, though the grantor has agreed to the addition of centerline rumble strips.

Despite this allowance, it is yet unclear how many trees at minimum would need to be cut to fall within the grant’s parameters as ODOT is reticent to deviate

from the data-driven stipulations of the funding.

Very few trees were agreed upon as possible removals at the input meeting. Should a consensus not be met, the grant may very likely be sent back to the state.

“We heard the potential for two trees to be removed and [we need] clarity from ODOT about how many trees is enough,” said Taylor. “Before we rule out the ability to use the funding, I’m doing a little more investigation to determine

what’s feasible.”

Though the room appeared mostly resistant to the removal of trees along the road, resident Lowell Smith, who has lived on Sears Road for more than 45 years, was in favor of the idea.

“It’s great,” he said. “I think they got off on the side with strips and widening and stuff, but those trees — if you drive down Sears Road in the middle and on the end toward Seginaw, it’s dangerous. I had a tree fall down in front of

me and my son.”

Smith added that one tree across the street from his home is more than 100 feet tall.

“If it comes down, it’s going through the middle of the house. We’re dead,” he said. “I mean, that’s a concern for me.”

The formation of the community input meeting was done at the behest of Lane County Commissioner Heather Buch, who represents the district encompassing Sears Road. Buch was hopeful that an agreement could be reached with the information gathered.

“We’ll be able to go back and analyze all the information they’ve provided and see if there’s an alternate combination of things we might be able to do,” she said.

The presence of ODOT, Buch said, was a positive sign of community-government interchange.

“We had two people from ODOT here this evening. That’s fantastic, so we knew that they were listening,” she said. “That’s invaluable.”

Staff is scheduled to report back to the Board of County Commissioners on Aug. 27 where it may be determined if the project is still viable.

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