

U.S. 25 poses problems for some Fletcher walkers

By [Melissa Stout](#)

STAFF WRITER

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Contact Melissa Stout at 828-232-5967, via e-mail at mstout@CITIZEN-TIMES.com

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FLETCHER — Brian Williams can remember a day when riding a bike on U.S. 25 through Fletcher was safe. Now with the amount and speed of traffic on the five-lane road, he wouldn't even consider it.



photo: MELISSA STOUT/STAFF

Alegera Neyland, 43, of Fletcher, walks along U.S. 25 in Fletcher for exercise. She said she wishes there was a quieter road to walk on safely, but the traffic doesn't bother her as long as she's on the sidewalk. Crossing the five-lane road is what concerns her.

“When I was growing up here, I would ride my bike with my brother on Howard Gap Road onto (U.S.) 25 to the (Fletcher) post office and you might pass just a few cars,” Williams said. “Now it's like an interstate. As far as walking on it or allowing my daughter to walk on it — no way.”

Fletcher officials say one goal of the town is to be pedestrian-friendly. The town has talked about creating a “Heart of Fletcher” multi-use development, and greenways to connect neighborhoods and its community park.

But for some pedestrians, the U.S. 25 corridor creates a nonpassable boundary in the center of town.

Since there are sidewalks on both sides of U.S. 25 through town, officials don't plan to make changes in the near future.

"The good thing about the sidewalks is you can go from the north end to the south end of Fletcher. We see more people using them everyday," Mayor Bill Moore said. "But crossing the five-lane road is not the safest thing in town."

The need for speed

The speed limit on Hendersonville Road used to be 35 mph, but when the road was widened it increased to 45 mph, the mayor said.

"We encourage our citizens to drive with caution," Bill Moore said.

Michele Skeele has been working with Walk Wise, Drive Smart, a pedestrian safety program through the Council on Aging and UNC Highway Safety Research Center, and says road design plays a major factor.

"When you design a highway that looks like a freeway people are going to go faster," Skeele said. "There are ways to engineer a street or design it so it wouldn't encourage freeway thinking."

But the state Department of Transportation doesn't have any plans to redesign the road.

In fact, Reuben Moore, division operations engineer with Division 14 of the DOT, said the wide outside lanes are a feature that accommodates bicycle traffic and allows traffic to be a little farther away from the curb for pedestrians.

Sgt. Steve Morgan, acting chief of the Fletcher Police Department, said since U.S. 25 was widened all the way to Hendersonville more people are traveling the road.

"People are starting to use it more now," he said. "The speeding is highlighted more than it was before."

Decreasing the speed limit is not an option, Morgan said. Town officials would have to petition the state to have it reduced, he said.

When the road was widened, it was probably designed for traffic to travel 50 mph, according to Reuben Moore. He said it

wouldn't be appropriate to lower the speed limit, and even if it were appropriate, drivers probably wouldn't comply.

"I think someone would have to make a very good argument based on lowering the speed limit," Reuben Moore said.

From Jan. 1 through Jan. 17, 14 out of 27 citations issued in Fletcher on U.S. 25 were for speeding, Morgan said. The average speed of the vehicles cited was 62 mph, he said.

This is something Morgan wants to address, though he is waiting for more officers to complete training to become radar certified.

“With the current manpower we have, we do the very best we can,” Morgan said.

An increase in police patrol on the corridor that runs between Ingles and the Owen warehouses should decrease speed, Morgan said.

“When people see police cars and see other people getting pulled, it will generally slow them down,” Morgan said.

Walkability is a goal

Mark Biberdorf, Fletcher town manager, said a walkable community is a town objective.

“One of the goals with the Heart of Fletcher is to have it connected with the greenway system and the park,” he said.

The Heart of Fletcher, a proposed downtown district that will have commercial and office space and residential units, will be built on the east side of U.S. 25, Biberdorf said.

But a majority of new developments are on the west side of U.S. 25, including South Chase.

“It’s tough to cross from one side to the other,” Biberdorf said. “I don’t know what the fix is.”

Don Buscher, 53, lives in South Chase and walks to Ingles and back twice every weekend for exercise. He said he’s never had a problem using the crosswalks and pedestrian lights to cross the street.

“It’s not near as walkable as Asheville, but I feel safe that there’s sidewalks the whole way,” he said.

Alegera Neyland, 43, of Fletcher uses the sidewalks to walk for exercise too. She walks from the north end of town to the south end and crosses when the sidewalk ends. But there isn’t a crosswalk on that section of the road.

“I do wish there was a quieter road to walk on safely,” she said. “It doesn’t bother me to walk until I get ready to cross over.”

Biberdorf said it would be expensive to engineer a bridge over U.S. 25.

“I wouldn’t rule anything out, just realistically it gets pretty expensive to engineer and to safely move pedestrian traffic across (U.S.) 25,” Biberdorf said.

Tom Campanella, professor of urban design at the UNC Chapel Hill, doesn’t recommend bridges either. He said they’re expensive and have their own problems with security.

“It’s an interesting challenge,” he said. “To overcome a five-lane highway is a monumental challenge.”

Even though Fletcher has crosswalks and pedestrian signals, Campanella describes a highway through a town as a “big barrier. It’s like the great wall.”

He said psychologically people don’t want to cross a big road with stopped traffic and feel like a spectacle when they do.

Eric Rufa, Fletcher planning director, said the town’s Greenway Master Plan has trails connecting various parts of the town, but tying neighborhoods and other parts of the town to greenways requires getting easements and funding.

“One of the hypothetical legs of the greenway trail would run along Cane Creek and could go under (U.S.) 25,” he said.

But these hypothetical trails are long-range planning initiatives that could be years in the making, Rufa said.

Future thought

Skeele said walkability should be a goal of any community, but having a five-lane road is not ideal.

“Anytime you build a major highway corridor — if you don’t build it with walkability in mind you’re just creating barriers,” she said.

In 1977, Hendersonville reconstructed Main Street with a serpentine design to increase property values for downtown buildings, slow traffic and make it more walkable. Locals debated the “Downtown Shopping Park,” but the plan eventually went through.

Biberdorf doesn’t see that as a practical solution for Fletcher with the amount of traffic trying to move down Hendersonville Road.

“It’s a little bit different animal,” he said.

For walkers who do cross the road, there is a

17-second window to get across the 60-foot wide five lanes. That’s walking about 3.5 feet per second or 2.4 mph, Reuben Moore said.

“We haven’t had any complaints that I’m aware of, but if we did, we could increase (the time to cross), and that would be something reasonable for us to do,” Reuben Moore said.

A more walkable community may require lowering the speed limit, adding a couple more crosswalks and another traffic light, said Shawn Witaschek, 20, of Hendersonville, who was walking on the sidewalk along U.S. 25 last week.

But even with these changes, Witaschek said he thinks creating a walkable downtown with this traffic will be difficult.

And there’s probably more traffic to come. In the past 12 years almost 2,200 homes, townhomes or condominium units have been built in 14 Fletcher subdivisions or developments. That number doesn’t include 211 units Biltmore Farms has proposed for ParkVista.

Rufa said there’s more to come too, but at this point he can’t disclose details.

“We’re working with other developers that have possible proposals,” he said.

Despite the large influx of people and the traffic they bring, creating a walkable community can be done, Skeele said. For example, the median could be redone with grass and bushes, with turn lanes every so often instead of one continuous turn lane.

“A highway that incorporates more green would encourage people to take their time a little more,” she said.

Nonmotorized travel should be a priority, Skeele said.

“It needs to be thought out for pedestrians and bicycles, not just automobiles,” she said. “It can be done, but it requires thought and planning.”

Contact Stout at 232-5967 or mstout@PISGAHMOUNTAINNEWS.com.

TIMED CROSSING

Pedestrians have 17 seconds to cross the 60-foot-wide ,five-lane U.S. 25 in Fletcher. If you don’t think this is enough time, call the state Department of Transportation at 631-1185, says Reuben Moore, division operations engineer with Division 14 of the DOT.