

If not now – When?

Last week, yet another tragic accident occurred on main street. The papers were quick to point out that this is a dangerous section of road in the middle of a high pedestrian area. They also quoted statistics that by design do not tell the whole story. They claim one pedestrian death since 2003. Anyone who lives around here knows this to be tragically wrong. We have seen a young lady hit a telephone pole early in the morning. A child hit while going to music lesson. A grandmother headed to a lunch with her family. Countless others have been hurt or had very near misses but no statistics will ever be generated. Whatever happened to the couple that left the Theater in Town and were hit crossing the road? Statistics alone cannot tell the story of our Main Street.

Many officials, State and Town have been quoted about changes that have occurred since Courtney Sipes was tragically lost. They have made some improvements like longer times to cross the street. A fence was installed to stop pedestrians from crossing in the middle of traffic. I must point out however, that most of the pedestrian accidents have occurred at the cross walks. The fence is a practical idea that will help, but at the same time a cop out, and the cheapest way to quickly fix an overall poorly designed down town.

In 2009 I ran for Town Council. For a year I carried a design of Main Street Smithtown around to every debate and meeting. The purpose of running was to bring the issue of revitalizing our main street areas to the front of the small Town politics. Safety of crossing Main Street, a sewer district, and making the north side of Smithtown pedestrian friendly were all brought into the political debate. This was before all the recent tragedies. The debate was friendly, and all the candidates took to supporting the ideas and concepts of a better main street. No one disagrees that main street is in need of help!

Although nobody disagrees that main street needs help, I often hear that the circumstances of accidents on Main Street are partly the cause of the driver, or even lack of vigilance of the pedestrian. As an Architect, I was trained that accidents happen from several circumstances happening at once. A poorly designed roof on a building will not collapse until a bad winter overloads it. Main Street contributes to accidents simply because it is designed for speed, not safety! The four lanes are under the state standard width for a road. The cross walks wear quickly and they are often not visible. The utility poles often restrict visibility.

If you are idealistic, you should never run for politics. A wise Smithtown politician told me that during the election. He was right, I am no politician. It is not one of my strong points. An idea of a safe and thriving town consumes me. It tears my heart out every time a tragedy occurs in this Town I love. I live and work on these streets every day. My kids are always running around, and I fear for their safety every time they are down town.

The time is now for us to change this unsafe and unusable Main Street. With the business vacancy rate higher than any other comparable towns, and the inability for vehicular and pedestrian traffic to move through town, we are at a standstill. The four lanes of traffic

that were installed in the 1970's are too narrow and simply just not right. Consider the fact that Route 25 is only two lanes before you enter Smithtown from both the east and west. Why would a main street area look as if you can go faster as you enter town. The design is wrong and needs to be rethought.

A familiar answer to the four lanes in Smithtown is "The traffic must move at rush hour". I accept that we are moving a large number of cars, but what happens at rush hour has to be considered! Anyone who has been caught in main street traffic knows that the left lane becomes a turning lane. If you are smart you keep to the right when entering town. Often we see cars backed up ten deep waiting for someone to make a left hand turn. Frustrated drivers will quickly jump to the right lane and hit the gas. If the left lane is a turning lane, we should make it a turning lane!

Am I over simplifying the traffic problem? Absolutely! No solution to Main Streets safety is a one item thing. Turning lanes and clearly marked pedestrian cross walks, speed enforcement, areas of refuge for pedestrians, better directional signs, elimination of the fifty year old utility poles are just a few issues. The Main Street needs a master plan. A comprehensive reconstruction of the downtown area to make it safe and revive it at the same time. We are way over due for this!

How are we going to pay for this? I would argue that we have paid an extremely high price already. A master plan has been promised almost every election cycle in recent years. When I ran for office in 2009, it was stated at a debate that the master plan would be completed any day now. We have not had any master plan for the Town of Smithtown since the seventy's or even earlier. If you do not have a plan, you do not have anything! Simply talking about the town being safer is not going to make it safe. No federal or state funds can ever be asked for unless these steps are taken.

I submit the following items for consideration:

- A three lane highway with a center median and left turning lanes. One lane for going west and two lanes going east. Left turning lanes would be limited to selected streets and entrances.
- A new sewer district to encourage revitalization of Main Street.
- Put the utilities along Main Street underground and eliminating the telephone poles that are less than six inches from the road.
- Eliminate parallel parking at the cross walk areas so that pedestrians do not walk between cars.
- Create brick style cross walks similar to what the town did on Maple Avenue.
- Create signage that encourages cars to move slowly through the down town.
- Coordinate a master plan that incorporates town parking facilities as far back as the train station. Provide signs that tell people where the public parking is.
- Enforce the speed limit.
- Create planters and areas of protection for pedestrians walking along our sidewalks.
- Fix all the sidewalks and curbs.

I ask every resident to support these ideas and any thoughtful reasonable concept for a better Main Street. I ask every elected official that has any connection to this corridor to make these concepts your own. All of these items are reliant on each to be done. You cannot cherry pick from this list because the safety of town would be compromised. We can never eliminate tragedies on our streets, but we sure can do a lot better. The time to act is now! Let us not wait for another tragedy.

Mark Mancini – Resident, Parent, and Business Owner