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PennDOT, LVPC Tech Assist Program: An Investment in Safety, Efficiency

Traffic Engineer Patrick Wright and LVPC Senior Planning Technician Brian Hite stood along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Allentown as traffic whizzed past, seemingly oblivious that people standing at the crosswalk meant they should be stopping.

But that was the point of why they were there: to work with Allentown City officials to raise pedestrian awareness and safety at an intersection that carries 16,000 vehicles a day within two blocks of three schools and a youth recreation center.

The Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) is now doing house calls for municipalities trying to improve safety and prioritize pedestrian and bicycle awareness. It's all part of a partnership between PennDOT and the LVPC to offer feet-on-the-ground advice.

The best part: it makes communities safer and it's all free.

"PennDOT considers this an excellent investment because it not only helps make the transportation network safer, but it allows our communities to get the best bang for their transportation buck," Hite said. "If you're going to schedule a safety project, you might as well use best practices."

LTAP and LVPC are in their 12th year of partnership of providing education and best practices to help municipal crews get the most of their roadway and community maintenance dollars. In the past, that included free day-long or half-day classes, on everything from roadway safety audits to speed limits to salt and snow management, attended at the LVPC offices by hundreds of municipal engineering, public works and road crew employees a year.

However, after the Covid-19 Pandemic forced those classes to be moved online, losing the benefit of in-person interactions, PennDOT and the LVPC put a greater focus on a "Tech Assist" program that sends professionals like Wright and Hite into the field to help municipalities get the most out of their improvement projects.

Their visits through the Lehigh Valley just during a two-day period in May illustrated how different every project is. Allentown was looking for advice on the flashing lights designed to get MLK traffic to stop for pedestrians at one tricky intersection. North Catasauqua was looking for help locating stop signs in the right places through its residential district plagued by parking issues and Lower Milford Township wanted recommendations on the best way to slow down speeders who have too often lost control on curves along rural sections of Kings Highway and Blue Church Road.

While all of those sound relatively simple, each includes hundreds of options to choose from in finding the right plan.

Allentown, for example, was trying to get motorists traveling 35 mph and higher to honor crosswalks that help students and youths across a three-lane roadway.

“If you’re going to use flashers, I’d put in the audible kind,” Wright said as he stood with Allentown Traffic Control Superintendent Nelson Varughese, at MLK Boulevard and Fourth Street, in front of the Parkettes Gymnastic Training Center. “And I’d remove this yield sign next to the stop sign. It’s sending a conflicting message.”

North Catasauqua’s issues were more nuanced and widespread. The layout of its residential neighborhood streets was done more than a century ago, at a time when most homeowners were walking to work at the nearby iron and steel works, said Borough Council President Peter Paone. As a result, it includes a series of narrow streets where it can be difficult for pedestrians and drivers to see traffic coming.

“We have homeowners parking right to the corner on many of our neighborhood streets, and it’s just not practical to enforce a [30-foot] from the corner rule,” Paone said.

“Then if you’re going to allow the parking, you’re going to need a series of four-way stops,” said Wright, a PennDOT consultant engineer working for Pennoni engineering. “In some ways, the parking can serve as a traffic-calming measure.”

Each Tech Assist included an office meeting to discuss the details of what the municipality was looking to accomplish, followed by a walk-through of the project area, which in the case of North Catasauqua, was a large portion of the borough’s central residential district. From there, the municipality gets a detailed analysis report with engineering recommendations, and often continued dialogue – if the municipality wants it – assisting them in bringing their projects to completion. Allentown, for example, got a 20-page report the following week that recommended several improvements, such as a pedestrian refuge island and flashing lights.

“If you have a vision of what you want your community to be,” Wright said, “we’ll help you design it. That’s why we’re here.”

Any Lehigh Valley municipality that would like LTAP help in advancing their pedestrian or bicycle safety improvement projects can schedule a Tech Assist by contacting Brian Hite at bhite@lvpc.org or by calling 610-264-4544.

