



Pickell pleads to state about death toll on M-15 in Genesee County

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GENESEEE COUNTY, Michigan -- Tom Smith Jr. knows that changing a road isn't easy.

It took the state seven years to add a left-turn lane at M-15 and Kipp Road after his 27-year-old brother Jeff was killed in a crash there in 2001.

But as deaths continue to mount on M-15 -- 14 since 2004 -- Smith doesn't want to wait another seven years to see something done.

"It's obvious there's a problem," said Smith.

Smith's not alone in that feeling.

On Wednesday, Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell asked the Michigan Department of Transportation why more isn't being done to address the string of deaths on M-15. Pickell, however, said he left the 30-minute meeting disappointed.

And money is a big reason why.

Despite his urging for a left-hand turn lane on M-15 near Green Road in Goodrich, Pickell said he was told the project likely won't happen for another three or four years.

Last month, a 14-year-old Lapeer girl died after a crash at that spot.

"How many more people have to be killed before 2012?" said Pickell.

Pickell said MDOT told him it gets \$2 million a year for such projects but that Genesee County must share that money with 13 other counties. A single turn-lane project can cost upwards of \$500,000, said Pickell.

An MDOT spokeswoman said the agency continually reviews road safety but declined to address Pickell's specific comments because she did not attend the meeting.

Last month, an MDOT official told The Journal that M-15 is among the most traveled two-lane roads in the county and is reviewed annually for safety.

Pickell said he told MDOT that the sheriff's department also has gotten a lot of complaints about near-crashes on M-15. He said MDOT responded that it only factors actual crashes into its ongoing road safety reviews.

"They said there's no money for near misses," said Pickell, adding he was given assurances that MDOT will look into his concerns.

But Pickell worries where that will lead given that he said MDOT disputes his core belief that M-15 suffers from poor engineering.

"That is a fatal road," said Pickell.

Pickell said he next plans to ask state legislators to form a task force to evaluate the safety of M-15.

Goodrich resident Tim Zirnhelt believes drivers could make the road safer by putting down their cellphones and laying off the gas pedal.

But Zirnhelt would also like to see a left-hand turn lane that extends the entire length of M-15 from Davison into Oakland County.

"I think a left-hand turn lane would help," said Zirnhelt.

Tom Smith understands that changing M-15 would be costly and said it's hard for him to peg exactly what he thinks is wrong with the road.

He adds that he also doesn't drive it much anymore because it's too painful to pass the crash site where he lost his younger brother -- an aspiring teacher with a "legendary smile."

"I hope something changes," said Smith, 38, of Flint.

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