

Last week, we quoted from documents created over the last 18 years that point to the importance of and public support for improving the 98 corridor through the Historic District. Imagine for a moment that you are a first-time visitor to the panhandle and are driving from Panama City to Apalachicola, You have just entered the Port St. Joe city limits. Next, imagine yourself driving on 98 (Monument) between First and Costin (71). Imagine viewing picturesque sidewalks, dotted with trees that create a canopy of shade and well-tended potted plants along the sidewalks. Imagine a play of color and shading to separate the traffic from the pedestrian area, and top it off with an open café area for the hungry and weary traveler. Imagine crosswalks that make you feel safe and traffic that is aware and careful of pedestrians and families crossing back and forth from the Marina to the Historic District. Unfortunately, this is not our current picture. In fact, the appearance and safety built in to this stretch of road does little to represent the Port St. Joe we know—the Port St. Joe that was named last week as the USDA Florida Community of the Year for 2007.

There are approximately 12,000 car trips each day passing through this area. And yet, we do not currently see near the capture of potential business that is possible and for which we need to vigorously plan. Something is missing; something is wrong with this picture. With the FDOT resurfacing project in planning, now is the time to present our case to improve—and we mean really improve—this gateway to our city. We should see successful businesses along that stretch of road, and we should see sidewalks teeming with pedestrian traffic. However, this is currently not the case.

The intersection at First/Marina and 98 could and should be a beautiful. And efficient. It is neither. This intersection needs to be widened to accommodate left- and right-hand turns from each direction. In addition, First has become a favorite surface street, with traffic counts outnumbering those on the four-lane 71. The intersection at 71 and 98 is likewise in need of improvement. These conditions will do nothing but get more dangerous and ineffective as the beautiful Marina business/commercial area continues to populate.

Let's look at traffic flow into and out of the Piggly Wiggly Center. Let's find a way to turn left out of the parking lot that is a safe distance from the intersection to, again, lessen the congestion at the Marina/98 intersection. Let's open this alternate route and get rid of the bollards that are unsightly and serve to collect dirt and any free-floating paper. Let's make this intersection something that will encourage visitors and passers-by that our city is worth exploring.

Remarkably, Pat Strayer and Officer Larry Dickey just came to my office to discuss an accident at 71 and 98—and accident that could have been avoided with implementation of the plan the PSJRA has laid out. Additionally, Officer Dickey also noted that vehicles regularly exceed the 35-mph speed limit (he used the words “45 to 50”).

Next week, I will lay out the ways by which we can implement these plans, and these plans will indeed be expensive. Careful planning and partnering (and funding through grant programs) will get us there...sooner rather than later.