Crosswalk Policy Summary

In 2000 and 2001, there were a number of discussions at both the Plan Commission level and the City Council level regarding the pedestrian crosswalks on North Main Street at Union Street, and on Cascade Avenue through the UW-RF Campus. Coming out of those discussions, it was suggested that the City may wish to consider establishing a clear policy on where to provide pedestrian crosswalks.

The following group met to develop a policy that was adopted by the City Council:

- Mike Keenan, Park Board
- Ellen Smith, Plan Commission
- Dale Braun, UW-River Falls
- Dave Wisdorf, Public Works

Reid Wronski, City EngineerThe goal of such a policy was to have a consistent approach applied throughout the City of River Falls with regards to crosswalks. The committee did extensive research on the issue in order to propose what they felt was a responsible policy regarding crosswalks. A research of information on "marked crosswalks" found no compelling study providing the effectiveness of crosswalks, and some evidence that "marked crosswalks" could have a negative influence on pedestrian safety.

One issue of particular interest to the committee was multiple studies done elsewhere that showed pedestrians to be significantly more likely to be involved in an accident at a marked crosswalk than at an unmarked crosswalk. These studies showed that nearly six pedestrian accidents were occurring in marked crosswalks for every one mishap in unmarked crosswalks. When this ratio was adjusted in terms of relative crosswalk usage, there was still a significant 2 to 1 difference in accidents.

Marked crosswalks are widely classified as "safety devices," and Wisconsin law gives the pedestrian the right-of-way when within them. Interestingly, however, there is strong evidence that these very facts prompt many pedestrians to feel overly secure when using a marked crosswalk. Some pedestrians aggressively place themselves in a hazardous position with respect to vehicles in the mistaken belief that the motorist can and will stop in all cases, even when it may be impossible to do so.

By contrast, a pedestrian using an unmarked crosswalk generally feels less secure, less certain that the motorist will stop, and exercises more caution in waiting for safe gaps in traffic before crossing. The end result is fewer accidents at unmarked crosswalks.

One of the commonly accepted functions of the marked crosswalk is that it serves as a warning device to the motorists. And yet, studies show that the motorist's view of a crosswalk is greatly reduced when the driver is at the safe stopping sight distance -- where he should be able to perceive and react to a pedestrian in a crosswalk -- due to the effects of foreshortening and distance diminishment. The driver’s view of the crosswalk is further affected by road alignment, irregularities in the pavement, and other variables like weather, dirty windshield, glare and adverse lighting conditions. Meanwhile, the pedestrian's view of the same crosswalk is quite impressive and the pedestrian is prone to assume that, since they can see the crosswalk so well, certainly the motorist can see it just as effectively. This resulting overconfidence is seen as another factor in the disproportionate share of accidents in marked crosswalks.

Realizing that marked crosswalks are a useful traffic engineering device for channelizing pedestrians and helping pedestrians find their way across complex and confusing intersections,

the committee developed a policy for use in River Falls. This policy established criteria which should be met to warrant installation of a marked crosswalk. The criteria include: pedestrian volume, approach speed, distance to nearest marked crosswalk, visibility, illumination, and average gaps in traffic. The policy also dictates consistent standards for marked crosswalks if they are warranted and cover issues such as, painting, signage, and parking restrictions to create better visibility.

The issue of where and how the City should implement marked crosswalks is a difficult issue with diverse views. Perceived safety, actual safety, parking, cost, pedestrian awareness and driver awareness introduce unique and sometimes contradictory factors to this issue.