

A 54-year-old highway design blunder took another victim, a 52-year-old man

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On 2015.11.03 at 6:52am, a 52-year-old corporate executive who was riding his bicycle westward through the Page Mill Expressway interchange with Interstate 280 reportedly was hit and killed by a 19-year-old motorist. CHP Officer Art Montiel reportedly said “It appears that somehow the vehicle and the bicyclist came into contact. We are trying to see if the bicyclist crossed the lane and was struck by the vehicle, but that’s just speculating.” For one version of the story see

http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_29064233/palo-alto-bicyclist-killed-page-mill-road

Officer Montiel is also reported to have said that “the CHP frequently gets calls about cyclists not staying within bike lanes in the area. City and county officials have grappled over the years with improving safety along Page Mill Road.” In other words, the CHP officer was speculating that this was the cyclist’s fault, which is what they usually say based on no evidence. The statement about “improving safety along Page Mill Road” is pure nonsense in

that the major deficiencies in its design were identified in 1965 yet the only improvement, which was made in the late 1990s, was promptly nullified by an incompetent California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) engineer.

In another publication CHP Officer Montiel is quoted from an email as saying, "At this point, it looks like for unknown reasons, the bicyclist left the right side of the roadway and traveled across the #2 and #1 lanes where he was struck by the VW within the #1 lane." This again is pure nonsense in that cyclists who wish to go through the interchange are forced to cross two adjacent lanes of fast traffic in order to get to the bike lane, which is an intrinsically dangerous maneuver that is forced on them by the road layout.

As you may recall, on Nov. 4, 2010, 47-year-old Lauren Ward was killed by a big-rig truck as she was bicycling west on Alpine Road near the southbound on-ramp to 280 and the CHP automatically blamed the cyclist, overlooking the fact that truckers entering a loop on-ramp frequently swing to the left going in so that their trailer will not hit the curb on the inside of the turn. In doing that, evidently without checking the left side mirror, the driver hit and killed the cyclist. The CHP eventually figured that out and, checking the records, found that the driver had earlier killed other cyclists.

I and others have been trying to get this dangerous interchange reconfigured for many years but have been consistently ignored. Considering the big picture, it is clear that the governmental agencies, especially Caltrans, are consistently ignoring the safety of cyclists and pedestrians. That needs to be fixed.

Ancient History. Following the U.S. seizure of California from Mexico in 1848 and the ensuing Gold Rush, many former gold seekers subsequently settled in northern California as farmers or lumbermen. Page Mill Road was built as a dirt road along the route of an old Indian trail, giving access to redwood forests on the west side of the mountains, and was used to transport lumber from there to communities around the bay. Page Mill was a lumber mill located on part of this old road that is now a trail through Portola Redwoods State Park.

Beginning in the 1880s cyclists joined equestrians and horse-drawn vehicles on the roads and soon initiated the push to pave roads so as to make their travels faster and more stable. That action greatly benefited the motorists who began appearing after the beginning of the 20th Century.

Following WWII, the Eisenhower Administration initiated the major Interstate Highway program. In the early 1960s, shortly after the Town of Los Altos Hills was incorporated, design of the I-280 Freeway was initiated by Caltrans. However, they encountered strong opposition from the City and County of San Francisco that held up its completion for a time and resulted in having no freeway connection between the Peninsula and the Golden Gate Bridge, to the ongoing consternation of many people.

Unfortunately, the Page Mill/I-280 interchange was incompetently designed and provided no way for non-motorized traffic, such as bicyclists, pedestrians and equestrians, to get through safely.

First Attempt at Repair. In 1965, before construction was completed, the

Town of Los Altos Hills observed that this design blunder prevented non-motorized traffic from traveling between the main part of the Hills and its residential areas along Old Page Mill Road and Christopher Lane, even though they were separated by only a hundred yards or so going under the freeway. In order to get around that problem, pedestrians would have to make a trek of six miles or so down through Palo Alto and back up a different route.

Addressing this problem, in 1965 the Town Council adopted a resolution calling for these safety issues to be addressed, but they were ignored by Caltrans – see “[A RESOLUTION OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF LOS ALTOS HILLS REQUESTING PROVISION OF NON-VEHICULAR WAYS THROUGH INTERCHANGE.](#)” Council Resolution No. 306, Town of Los Altos Hills, June 7, 1965.

Second Attempt. In 1966, after I joined Stanford University and initiated construction of the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (SAIL) in Palo Alto at 1600 Arastradero Road, I began commuting through the Page Mill interchange daily and observed the safety problems there, including debris from many accidents. Though I perceived the safety problems immediately I didn't know how to get them fixed then.

A segment of the old road that was bypassed by the new Page Mill Expressway was renamed “Old Page Mill Road.” Non-motorized westbound traffic continued to go on Old Page Mill Road because it went around a hill instead of over it and provided a beautiful and quiet route next to Matadero Creek to the vicinity of the

interchange. However, there was no safe route to the other side of the freeway. That didn't matter so much in the very early days when there was little traffic, but things got progressively worse.

From the beginning there was a dirt path through the interchange along the north side of the Expressway that could be used by pedestrians and equestrians going in either direction. However, they had to cross a one-lane northbound on-ramp and a two-lane southbound on-ramp, which generally carried traffic moving at about 50 MPH. That made it extremely hazardous during rush hours. To make matters worse, the initial construction included a tall chain link fence between the path and the road that went part way around the corner of the two-lane southbound on-ramp. This meant that pedestrians were forced to cross those ramps on the far side of a blind curve. It would be hard to imagine a more hazardous design.

The interchange was also unacceptably hazardous for bicyclists. When going west on Page Mill they had to first cross the entrance to the northbound on-ramp, then move left across the right lane before it split in two leading to the southbound on-ramp. That was a dangerous move under heavy traffic conditions and even if the cyclist succeeded he or she then ended up riding in the left lane which was only 12 feet wide – too narrow for motorists to pass a cyclist safely. If the rider stuck to the right edge of that lane, fast traffic would be moving by on both sides. The rider could legally ride in the center of the left lane so as to block overtaking traffic, which was and is legal under California Vehicle Code Section 21202 but, since vehicles frequently changed lanes in that zone, doing that took

nerves of steel. A safer (but illegal) move was to ride along the left edge of the through lane, forcing motorists to pass on the right and possibly side-swipe vehicles in the next lane.

Eastbound cyclists faced similar problems, since just past the interchange the through lane merged with the left lane of the descending two lane northbound off-ramp, where cars often spun out and struck a nearby street light post. That interchange was on my commute route for many years and I've been through it over 5,000 times by car, bicycle and on foot and often saw the results of such crashes. Some agency eventually put concrete barriers in front of the light post just past the right turn at the bottom of the hill so that it would not have to be replaced so often.

In 1993, after doing a successful Silicon Valley startup and later retiring from Stanford, I joined the Pathways, Parks and Recreation Committee of the Town of Los Altos Hills and was promptly elected Chair. I then documented the several bicycling, pedestrian and equestrian hazards and proposed fixes. Specifically, I proposed the following two changes:

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1. The chain link fence was to be removed, which would allow pedestrians and equestrians to cross the southbound on ramp at a more visible location. That would not ensure that they could cross in a timely manner, since there was no way to halt the two lanes of traffic other than by bravely stepping out in a lane and waving one's arms, but at least they could see and be seen by oncoming traffic.
 2. To accommodate westbound cyclists, I proposed that the left

(through) lane be widened by excavating into the median so that it could safely be shared by vehicles and cyclists.

That proposal was reviewed and approved by the Pathways Committee then passed to the Council, which also endorsed it and passed it along to County Roads authorities. The Council also appointed me to the Bicycle Advisory Committee (BAC) of Santa Clara County and the Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) and that group promptly elected me Chair. Using that bully pulpit, I was able to get those changes made in 1997 with the help of County Roads authorities including Masoud Akbarzadeh, Michael Austin, Dan Collen, and Ananth Prasad among others. This substantially improved the safety of cyclists heading westward and of pedestrians and other non-motorized traffic heading either direction.

A Disastrous Redesign. Just two years later the interchange was reconfigured again so as to make it easier for northbound off-ramp traffic to go west on Page Mill by adding a third lane going under the freeway, with a bike lane between it and two lanes of the expressway traffic, which were to feed directly into the southbound off-ramp. During the review process I pointed out to the Caltrans engineer that this forced cyclists to cross two lanes of fast traffic and if they failed they would either die or be trapped on the right side of the on-ramp. Thus, this design was much worse for cyclists than it had ever been.

The engineer stuck to his proposal claiming that it was needed to prevent motor vehicle accidents. When asked for the alleged accident data, however, he declined to produce it, which made it

clear that his claim was fabricated. His actions were consistent with Caltrans' ongoing focus on the needs of motorists and neglect of non-motorized traffic.

Eastbound cyclists either had to dash across two lanes of traffic coming down the northbound off-ramp in order to reach the right curb or hug the left side of the left lane for a hundred yards or so to reach the left turn lane leading to Old Page Mill Road. One result of this reconfiguration was that on 2002.06.27, a student cyclist from Stanford was struck from behind while trying to make that left turn and suffered fractured vertebrae. A person who accompanied her to Stanford Hospital subsequently posted an Internet observation from an anesthesiologist there that they receive many bicycle accident victims from that area. As a result of further inquiries, I was able to determine that no governmental authorities were tracking the frequencies and locations of bicycle crashes.

Perhaps the stupidest part of the Caltrans redesign was the addition of a pedestrian crosswalk with no traffic light on the far side of the blind curve where the two-lane northbound off-ramp descends from the freeway and traffic moves at about 60 MPH. That crosswalk, which is still there today, leads to a narrow sidewalk going part way uphill along the edge of the expressway before terminating, so that if anyone manages to survive the crossing of the off-ramp they end up having to walk on the expressway!

Third Attempt. In the 1990s I was also appointed as the Town Representative to the Santa Clara County Interjurisdictional Trails Committee and helped develop the County plan for off-road trails, including

one called S1 that was to roughly paralleled Page Mill Road and that plausibly could provide a way through or around the Page Mill/I-280 interchange. In 1997 Stanford University sought County approval of their plans for substantial new construction on campus and, as a condition of that approval, agreed to build a trail for bicyclists, equestrians and pedestrians going along Old Page Mill Road and through the I-280 Interchange, which would have solved the safety issue. The Stanford drawing of their proposed route led to the underpass of I-280 but didn't show how it would get to the west side of I-280.

Unfortunately, a couple of years later Stanford reneged on their offer to build that trail and publicly invited suggestions on which way to go. They received many suggestions, including several from me such as the trail shown below that would follow the green line between Old Page Mill Road and the existing cow tunnel going under I-280, which would connect directly to the Arastradero Preserve. Much of this route would lie within the narrow band along the edge of Stanford lands that was earlier annexed into Palo Alto so that city could also annex the lands of Arastradero Preserve, Palo Alto Country Club, and Foothills Park among others. That band is called the "Cherry Stem", hence this trail proposal was called the Cherry Stem Trail. However, Stanford flatly rejected this proposal and others. The reason given was that this would interfere with future development of the Stanford lands immediately adjacent to Los Altos Hills.

Instead, Stanford proposed to build a trail on the other side of the Page Mill Expressway going from Foothill Expressway up and over a large hill to

the corner of Arastradero and Purissima Roads. In other words, a trail to nowhere. In spite of strong objections by many residents, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors foolishly approved this proposal, apparently enabled by the strong political clout of the University.

The Supervisors' Chair at that time was George Shirakawa, who has since done jail time as a result of other activities. Stanford then offered the Town of Los Altos Hills millions of dollars to build a new trail along Arastradero Road to complete the connection to the Arastradero Preserve over a route that takes hikers about two miles out of their way and over two steep and unnecessary hills. Los Altos Hills foolishly accepted that offer and we now have a multi-million-dollar trail that almost no one uses. It likely will stand as a monument to Stanford's self-centered planning and governmental irrationality. But we still need a reasonable route for cyclists and pedestrians going between the Old Page Mill Road residential area and upper Page Mill Road.

Fourth Attempt. In June 2010, as construction got underway on the useless Expressway trail, I sent a memo to Richard Chiu, the new Public Works Director of Los Altos Hills, proposing that a multi-use trail be built along the route originally proposed by Stanford and using on-ramp traffic lights to provide safe passage that could also be used as metering lights for freeway access as needed.

See L. Earnest, "[A more direct and frugal route for the S1 Trail, with additional benefits](#)", letter to Public Works Director, Town of Los Altos Hills, 2010.06.30.

Mr. Chiu neither endorsed nor argued against this proposal. He simply ignored it, apparently either being unaware that there was a serious problem to be dealt with or thinking that it should not be his responsibility to fix it.

Fifth Attempt. I later contacted the County Roads people who I had worked with on this problem in the 1990s and urged them to readdress the safety issue. I was pleased to learn that they planned to initiate a redesign of the interchange and left my phone number along with an offer to assist in resolving the non-motorized traffic issues. I subsequently received a call from a person who I understood to be a contractor being hired to work on the design, but he informed me that this work would not begin for a couple more months and he seemed to be focused on motor vehicle accommodations. There was no follow-up so that channel disconnected. I much later learned that he had been terminated by the County.

Sixth Attempt. In 2012, having learned that the Town was setting up a Traffic Safety Committee, I applied for membership and was appointed. I then brought the Page Mill safety issues to the attention of that committee and put the same proposal before them that I had previously sent to the Public Works Director.

In that period Steve Schmidt, another Committee member, proposed building a fly-over bicycle-pedestrian bridge leading from Old Page Mill Road to a mixed-use two-way trail along the expressway median going to the Page Mill/Arastradero intersection. That clearly would be an elegant solution to this problem, but the construction of the bike bridge would be quite expensive.

After some discussion and physical review of the site, the Committee endorsed my proposal, which seemed to stand a better chance of being implemented in a timely manner. The Public Works Director chose not to participate in those discussions and again ignored this recommendation of the Committee, so nothing further happened.

L. Earnest, "[A safe route through the Page Mill/280 interchange for non-motorized traffic](#)," letter to LAH Traffic Safety Committee, April 23, 2012.

Seventh Attempt. Another run at this problem began in early 2013 in response to a Caltrans proposal to put signal lights on Page Mill Expressway on both sides of I-280; see "[A safe route for non-motorized traffic through the I-280/Page Mill interchange](#)".

By contacting the staff of Santa Clara County Supervisor for my District, namely Joe Simitian, I again attempted to get him to address the pedestrian/wheelchair problem but for some reason he and the other Supervisors initially focused on cyclists needs but also let that matter slip away again.

Eighth Attempt. After the 2015 cyclist death, I made another attempt to get this matter fixed; see "[A Safe Route Through the I-280 Page Mill Interchange for Pedestrians and Cyclists](#)".

Unfortunately, that recommendation again went nowhere, but some overseas readers provided translations of that recommendation into Polish and Czech languages, with links shown at the top of the article, but ongoing failure to act.