

Metuchen crosswalk embedded with lights to protect pedestrians

BY JOE TYRRELL
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Metuchen has lighted a path, literally in hopes of motorists and pedestrians from colliding on Main Street.

At a heavily traveled spot near the Metuchen train station, the borough has installed a crosswalk with runway-style lights embedded in the street. By doing so, Metuchen becomes the fourth community in New Jersey to try the newest method to alert drivers that they aren't the only ones on the road.

That's an increasing problem in Metuchen, a town awash in traffic from Route 27, Amboy Avenue, New Durham Road and large highways such as Route 287.

"It's the biggest issue we have in town," said Cpl. Jeff Temple, the traffic safety officer for the borough police department.

Brightly flashing lights are just one part of the borough's campaign to promote pedestrian safety.

"One of the requirements for federal funding is that we do enforcement," Temple said, so his assignment now includes talking to business owners and pedestrians in the area to alert them to the new system and warn against jaywalking.

"You don't want to write up the world" for such a minor offense but residents and visitors need to be aware of the hazards, said Metuchen Police Chief James Keane.

Since borough officials applied for federal traffic safety funds through the state Department of Transportation last fall, two elderly Metuchen residents have been struck and killed by cars, Temple said. Both were in the business district area — one on Woodbridge Avenue and the other

on New Street, just around the corner from the crosswalk.

"Even with the crosswalk lights, we don't want people to feel invulnerable," Keane said.

To avoid confusion for motorists, the funding is earmarked for locations where there are no traffic signals, Temple said. That fits the description of the Metuchen site, which is Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, the entrance to the train station.

The work was funded by \$21,995 in federal traffic safety funds funneled through the state Transportation Department. The borough is providing an extra \$5,500 to make sure the equipment blends in with retro-style fixtures in the downtown, such

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Pedestrians in Metuchen push a button on the street corner that activates the flashing light display that alerts motorists that the crosswalk is in use.

WALK

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Crosswalk fitted with lights

as gracefully curving street lamps.

By pressing a button, pedestrians will trigger a light display while they cross the street. The lights are

designed to last five to seven years, and the metal casings can be unscrewed to replace the bulbs.

Metuchen officials learned of the program when Union County installed the system two years ago across East Broad Street in Westfield in front of Temple Emanu-El, where a member of the congregation was struck and killed by a car while crossing the street in 1999.

Burlington County installed the

system, developed by Flight Light Inc. of Sacramento, Calif., between two schools in Pemberton in 1999, while the DOT paid for one in Denville that is triggered whenever someone steps into the crosswalk.

"It does seem to be accomplishing its purpose," said DOT spokesman Micah Rasmussen, but he added it is too soon to declare victory. "The traffic guys like to have three years of data before they draw conclusions."

In Westfield, the flashing lights "are hard to see during the day, but it's in the evening when we actually have the problem" with pedestrian safety, said Sgt. Terence Gillespie of the Westfield Traffic Bureau. To supplement the crosswalk, the town added flashing lights on poles at the crossing.

"It's working out all right," Gillespie said. "We haven't had any fatalities."

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