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County mulls Oak Drive, Ridge Road sidewalk

Some residents say project not necessary, others consider it a pedestrian safety issue

by Susan Singer-Bart | Staff Writer

Old trees and houses may stand in the way of a county proposal to construct a sidewalk from Damascus High School on Ridge Road to the southern end of Oak Drive.

But some residents fear the sidewalk would intrude on their property and believe the project is an unnecessary county expense.

"I don't think this is a worthwhile project the county should be doing," Maria Schooley, a resident of Oak Drive, said.

Schooley said she would be less opposed to a smaller sidewalk from the high school to John T. Baker Middle School, which is located on Oak Drive just past the Damascus Community Recreation Center, but she is against one that would run the entire length of Oak and take 11 to 22 feet from her front yard for an easement.

Schooley fears a sidewalk would require taking down a large Norwegian maple tree and removing part of her fence.

Many neighbors agree with her concern and told the county of their objections during a meeting to discuss the project in early December.

At this time the county is only looking into the possibility of building a sidewalk, as called for in the 2006 Damascus Master Plan, said Bruce Johnston, chief of the Department of Transportation's division of engineering.

There is an existing sidewalk on Oak Drive between Baker and the recreation center and sections of sidewalk on the north end of Ridge Road (Route 27).

His department is exploring two possible routes for the sidewalk as well as considering not building one at all.

One option would start on the east side of Ridge Road at Bethesda Church Road and continue south to Oak Drive, where it will run the entire length of the west side. It would also extend on the south side of Kingstead Road from Oak Drive to John Haines Neighborhood Park.

The second option would only build the sidewalk along Ridge Road. Steep slopes on Ridge Road may require retaining walls and significant grading to build a sidewalk, Johnston said.

"What we're doing now is a very early study — no field survey, traffic counts," Johnston said. "We don't want to waste taxpayer money on survey and design work on something we may not build."

Sidewalk advocates see it as a way to connect neighborhood to community facilities and the commercial center of the community.

"Right now, kids have to cross at a section where it's unsafe," said Warren Fleming, president of The Damascus Connection, a community advocacy group. "Give them a safe place to cross."

The Damascus Connection helped persuade officials that a traffic light installed at the northern intersection of Ridge Road and Oak Drive two years ago was needed.

Fleming said he is working with Linda Panagoulis, director of the community recreation center, to get the sidewalk built.

"I'm doing all I can," he said.

Schooley argues that the proposed sidewalk at the southern end of Oak Drive would encourage walkers to cross Ridge Road at that point, "which would be virtual suicide at any time of day. A traffic light at that point most definitely would be necessary."

The only county funding for the project is for the study, Johnston said. If the decision is made to build a sidewalk, it would probably not get funding until mid-2012. A sidewalk would take one year to design and another year to build, he said.

"By mid- to late-summer we'll have a recommendation to take back to the community through a newsletter," Johnston said.