

A plan to “slow down traffic” on West Bay Drive by reducing the lane widths is facing opposition from some commission members. The proposal also includes the addition of bike lanes in the space saved by the lane reductions.

The West Bay proposal is included in the county’s Complete Streets program, which is part of a larger plan by Forward Pinellas to improve traffic safety. Whit Blanton, director of Forward Pinellas, gave an update on the project at the Oct. 16 Belleair Bluffs commission meeting.

He said the preferred plan for this area of West Bay, from Clearwater-Largo Road to the Belleair Beach Bridge, is to narrow West Bay and add a separate bicycle/pedestrian path on the south side of the road. However, that solution is some years out. The short-term plan, scheduled for 2018 in connection with repaving the road, is to narrow the traffic lanes and add bicycle lanes within the current width of the road. It includes improved pedestrian crossings and landscaped medians.

Blanton said the proposed changes would make the road safer for bicyclists and pedestrians.

“It’s going to get a lot more bicycle and pedestrian friendly,” he said.

But Commissioner Suzy Sofer questioned that claim.

“My concern about narrowing the traffic lanes (to create bicycle lanes) is tremendous,” said Sofer. “Bikes on the sidewalk is the safest place for them,” she said. “We’re going to make a difficult situation worse.”

Sofer spoke of motorists “zipping in and out of traffic.”

“Putting bicycles on that road would be a catastrophe,” she said.

Speaking of the need to slow traffic, Blanton said West Bay Drive “does not have a heavy traffic count.”

Commissioner Taylour Shimkus said “it depends on the time of year.”

Bluffs resident Wanda Rusinowski said the traffic is “extremely heavy” on West Bay during holiday periods and the winter tourist season.

Questioned by Mayor Chris Arbutine about the city having input into the project as it moves forward, Blanton said he would “go back to the county and encourage them to involve you in any design plans.”

“You will have an opportunity to express any concerns to the county,” Blanton said.

Two weeks earlier in Belleair Beach, the City Council heard Chelsea Favero of Forward Pinellas speak on the West Bay Drive proposal. There was also pushback on the plan from council members.

Council Member John Pietrowski told Favero said “most of the traffic on (West Bay Drive) is cars, and you’re adjusting everything to favor bicycle traffic.”

Pietrowski was especially concerned about the proposed reduction in lane widths.

“Have you ever driven down there?” he asked. “Most of the people can’t stay in the 12 foot lanes. With 10 feet, they’re going to be all over.”

Council Member Jewels Chandler said she liked having a separate bike lane. But she also questioned the narrowing of traffic lanes and asked how wide the trucks are that deliver to the businesses.

Nine and a half feet, said Favero. That is a half foot narrower than the proposed 10-foot lanes.

The street plan’s goal of “slowing traffic” concerned Council Member Wanda Schwerer.

“We already have a traffic problem trying to get over the bridge, particularly in season,” she said. “It’s taken me 45 minutes to wait in line and cross the bridge.”

Belleair Beach council members have been advocating for electronic signs on West Bay Drive that alert motorists of congestion and redirecting motorists to Clearwater.

Council Member Mitch Krach said he shared Schwerer’s concerns about the traffic, which he said backs up sometimes to Missouri Avenue.

“Making the lanes smaller doesn’t make sense to me,” Krach said.

No council or commission members in either Belleair Beach or Belleair Bluffs spoke in favor of the county’s Complete Streets plan for West Bay Drive.

Favero told the Belleair Beach council the project is several years off. But Blanton updated that, saying the latest plan is to do it next year, with design starting right away.

Communities that support the Complete Streets program to some extent include Clearwater. The City Council agreed July 27 to authorize an agreement with Forward Pinellas to accept a \$50,000 Complete Streets planning grant to study a concept plan for one of the city’s major downtown thoroughfares.