

# Speed Drives Bullard Parkway Issue

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TEMPLE TERRACE - The morning commute is in full swing on Bullard Parkway west of the Hillsborough River bridge.

Seasoned westbound motorists tap their brakes as they enter the 30 mph speed zone, glance around for police officers, then step on the gas to catch the green light up ahead. It's a routine repeated hundreds of times on a Wednesday morning.

It comes to a screeching halt when Temple Terrace police officers, armed with speed detection devices, take their positions near Ridgedale Road.

Officers say they frequently stop vehicles traveling 20 mph above the posted speed limit in this congested stretch of roadway between 56th Street and the river, where the speed limit drops from 45 mph to 30 mph with little warning. Officers wrote 249 speeding tickets in the area from Jan. 1, 2005, through May 15, 2006, according to records. Of those, 124 were issued for driving 50 mph or more.

The speed enforcement efforts caught the attention of Gary Thompson, a traffic operations engineer for the Florida Department of Transportation and a Temple Terrace resident, as he drove along Bullard Parkway on a Sunday morning in April. His observation has sparked a discussion about whether the state can force the city to raise the speed limit.

"I just happened to notice one day that the police were out there writing tickets. I am just looking out for the average guy who drives a five-lane road and expects to have a reasonable speed limit," Thompson said. "You have this ... section where it drops to 30 [mph], so I sent an e-mail to [city engineer] Joe [Motta] asking why the speed limit wasn't 45."

Two dozen people who live and do business along the roadway were interviewed this week by The Tampa Tribune about Thompson's recommended speed limit increase. Most of them agreed it's a bad idea.

"We have 100 children who go here, and after-school pickup. It's an issue just getting in and out, even with the 30 mph speed limit," said Carrie Gassen, director of the Temple Terrace Presbyterian Weekday School on Bullard Parkway just west of the river. However, some people said the change is needed because it amounts to a "speed trap" for police.

"I just avoid it altogether because I don't feel like getting a ticket, and they are always out there waiting," said motorist Dana Stambaugh, who was putting gas in her car at a store just east of the speed zone and commutes to a marketing job in the West Shore area.

As it turns out, Thompson is not the first person to raise the speed limit issue. The city engineer and Temple Terrace Police Chief Tony Velong asked the same question in April 2002, according to a memo sent to City Manager Kim Leinbach.

At Velong's request, Motta conducted a traffic study to see how fast drivers were traveling on Bullard Parkway.

During a four-day traffic study on Bullard near Greenfield Avenue, the average speed was 40.9 mph hour, according to Motta's 2002 memo. State guidelines use a formula that would set the speed limit at 45 mph.

"Although the city agreed to post a 30 mph speed limit, both the police chief and I feel that it is inappropriate for this roadway," Motta wrote.

The 30 mph speed limit was set to "appease some of the vocal opposition" to a project to widen Bullard Parkway, the memo states. The widening work began in 1999.

"During the initial public meetings, Hillsborough County agreed to the posting of a 30 mph speed limit for this section of Bullard Parkway," the memo states. "Both Hillsborough County and the city did not want to jeopardize moving forward with those improvements."

Temple Terrace City Councilwoman Linda Shattles vowed this week to fight to keep the city's promise to residents of a 30 mph speed limit. She has proposed adding flashing lights to two 30 mph signs east of Glen Arven Avenue in an effort to educate drivers.

"It's just not an area where I think we need a fast lane. I wish we could lower it to 30 mph approaching 56th [on] Busch," she said. "I oppose raising it, and I will fight it to the end. I don't know if it will come to that; we have sent a response [to the state] and we will see what happens."

Leinbach presented Motta's findings to the city council in 2002, but the members opted to keep the speed limit in place based on their promise to residents, city spokeswoman Paula MacDonald said.

Thompson said the speed limit is inconsistent with state traffic standards. He suggested that the city perform another traffic study.

"We don't just arbitrarily set speed limits because somebody wants it that way," he said. "I wouldn't just expect them to go out and put a speed limit sign up without doing a speed study."

Perhaps a study is needed to show how difficult it is for residents to pull out of their driveways, said Jack Ferguson, who has lived along Bullard Parkway for four years. "Most residents have planted hedges to help keep the traffic noise down, and that doesn't make it any easier," he said.

The noise is the least of businessman Jose Ramos' worries. As the owner of Accounting Management Services, at Ridgedale Road and Bullard Parkway, Ramos has had to deal with the fallout from speeding tractor-trailers.

"See that X in the window?" he said, pointing to the left front window of his business Wednesday morning. "Every time one of those big trucks passed over the manhole going fast, it shakes the whole building. It cracked the window, and I am having it replaced."

Thursday, Leinbach received a telephone call from a DOT attorney who indicated the state is considering backing off its push to increase the speed limit. MacDonald said that until the city is notified in writing of the DOT's stance, it will continue to fight the matter.

"The city council stands by maintaining the residential character of the area, as it has since the road-widening project," she said.