

AVON

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from local people but from surrounding communities," he said. "I copied the sheets from the DOT meeting, so people could write their comments and sign it as a petition for a turning lane."

The Transportation Commission will finalize the five-year plan during this month's meeting in Pierre. Gill hopes to make a final push before the meeting.

"I already mailed one batch of petitions. They had to be in the DOT office by (Thursday)," he said this week. "We have some more (petitions) that we are trying to send in to Pierre."

The top sheet of the recently mailed petitions includes a full page of comments from Superintendent Tom Culver of the Avon school district.

Culver said he fears for his students' safety. The Avon school district's situation is complicated in two ways, he said.

"With open enrollment, we have a number of kids coming to school in Avon from surrounding towns. And we don't run bus routes for bringing students to and from school," he said.

"As a result, we have a large number of kids who are on the road in the morning and after school. We have roughly 250 kids in K-12, and I would say about 150 of them come from outside the city limits. There is a definite safety issue."

The situation reaches its peak twice a day, Culver said. "There is a lot of traffic in town around 8 o'clock in the morning and around 3:30 or 3:45 in the afternoon," he said.

Even if students practice defensive driving, it may not be enough, Culver said.

"I have heard horror stories where students are waiting, with their blinkers on, for (an oncoming) vehicle, and a vehicle behind the student will go flying by on the shoulder," he said.

Drivers have found problems even when trying to get off Highway 50 by taking a diagonal road into Avon, Culver said.

"You can be heading west and come to the 'Y' that goes into Avon," he said. "There are times, at basically the last second, when you see a car come over the hill and you have to hit the brake or make a quick decision to beat them to the punch."

The situation will worsen this fall, when school traffic competes with farm machinery bringing the harvest to the elevator in town, Culver said.

"Last year, harvest lasted so much longer. Because of the

weather, it took so long for them to get the crops out," he said. "There were people harvesting at Thanksgiving and into December. Hopefully, this year they will get the weather's cooperation."

Highway 50 has also seen an increase in truck traffic at Avon since the 1990s opening of the nearby Chief Standing Bear Memorial Bridge, Gill said. The bridge crosses the Missouri River, linking Running Water and Niobrara, Neb.

"At the meeting in Mitchell, the DOT said the bridge has twice the projected traffic as when it was constructed," Gill said.

Culver has seen the increased Highway 50 truck traffic from a personal perspective.

"My wife's cousin owns three semis, and he and other guys go (through Avon) when they go to Nebraska," he said.

A turning lane would also protect Highway 50 drivers from speeders coming from behind, Culver said. He told of witnessing a vehicle far exceeding the 55 mph speed limit.

"I am afraid some day there is going to be a fairly significant accident," he said.

Culver even questioned the 55 mph limit at Avon when other state highways post a 45 mph limit.

"Obviously, there has to be deterrence. Small towns can't afford law enforcement all the time. The state troopers are not always the answer," he said.

"The best idea is turning lanes. The expense initially may be higher. But if there is a fatality out there, what price can you put on that?"

The state has studied the Highway 50 situation at Avon, said Ron Peterson, the DOT area engineer at the Yankton office.

"There has been a study once before, and it was based on the requirements of the manual of uniform traffic control devices," he said. "The manual contains criteria. They look at things like traffic numbers and turning movements."

The DOT region traffic officer conducted the study, Peterson said, adding that he as an engineer doesn't control the process or make decisions on traffic requests.

"They have criteria for any kind of turning lanes, acceleration or deceleration sites and traffic signals," Peterson said.

While the study didn't result in a turning lane, the Avon request could receive reconsideration, he said.

"They may revisit the issue to see what has changed and see if there are things we haven't looked at before," he said.

The Avon turning lane is not on the five-year Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), Peterson said. The state Transportation Commission could reconsider the Avon request when it adopts the five-year plan this month, he said.

"A turning lane is feasible. They have a wide right of way on Highway 50 to construct one," he said. "But everything is tied to money."

Gill said he remains optimistic that the state will adopt a turn lane at some point in the future. He said he appreciates the support of surrounding communities.

Unfortunately, the lack of any fatalities at the Avon turnoff may make the turning lane a lower priority, Gill said.

"They have lights at the intersection of Highways 37 and 46, but three (people) were killed before they put the lights up," he said. "It's too bad that somebody has to get injured or killed before they spend dollars on a turning lane."

If the turning lane doesn't win an immediate spot on the STIP plan, Gill vowed to keep the fight.

"If this doesn't get done, I'll be back there next year," he said. "But I would rather act on the problem now than react when it's too late."

Republicans Want Review Of Birthright Citizenship

BY BEN EVANS
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Leading Republicans are joining a push to reconsider the constitutional amendment that grants automatic citizenship to people born in the United States.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said Tuesday he supports holding hearings on the 14th Amendment right, although he emphasized that Washington's immigration focus should remain on border security.

His comments came as other Republicans in recent days have questioned or challenged birthright citizenship, embracing a cause that had largely been confined to the far right.

The senators include Arizona's John McCain, the party's 2008 presidential nominee; Arizona's Jon Kyl, the GOP whip; Alabama's Jeff Sessions, the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee, and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a leading negotiator on immigration legislation.

"I'm not sure exactly what the drafters of the (14th) amendment had in mind, but I doubt it was that somebody could fly in from Brazil and have a child and fly back home with that child, and that child is forever an American citizen," Sessions said.

Legal experts say repealing the citizenship right can be done only through constitutional amendment, requiring approval by two-thirds majorities in Congress and three-fourths of the states. House legislation introduced previously to amend the right has stalled.

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