

RIVERSIDE: Safety of crosswalk where woman struck criticized

Casa Blanca resident Bob Garcia says he's complained about the intersection for years. Sunday, Isabel Pablo was struck there



STAN LIM/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Pedestrians cross the street on Monday, May 14, 2012 in Casa Blanca. A woman was struck by a Riverside police cruiser the morning before while walking across Madison Street, near Emerald Street.

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A Riverside community leader said he has asked the city for years to improve the markings and signage at a crosswalk where a police patrol car fatally struck a woman Sunday.

Isabel Pablo, 57, was taken off life support 12 hours after the 7:49 a.m. collision that happened when she crossed Madison Street at Emerald Street in the Casa Blanca neighborhood.

The officer was seen afterward shaking, his head in his hands.

Police said Pablo was outside the crosswalk.

“We know this from eyewitnesses’ and officers’ accounts,” Assistant Chief Chris Vicino said Monday by telephone.

The crosswalk is made up of connected flat pieces of rock. There are no stripes on either side. Bright-yellow signs on both sides of Madison featuring the pictogram of a pedestrian, as well as signs with arrows pointing to the crosswalk, warn drivers.

Bob Garcia, a member of the Casa Blanca Community Action Group, said in an interview at the scene Monday morning that the city has told him since the mid-1990s that there was no money for additional markings, flashers imbedded in the pavement or to post a stop sign.

Garcia said the city has told him that a traffic study showed no need for improvements.

The crosswalk is in front of St. Anthony’s Church, which Pablo frequently attended.

Garcia added that the opening of the nearby Casa Blanca Library in 2003 increased foot and vehicle traffic in the area, making the crossing more dangerous.

“It has always been an issue because of speed and traffic,” Garcia said.

Angel Gaytan Jr., who lives on Emerald, said he hears and sees vehicles driving too fast through the intersection on Sundays during family gatherings.

City spokeswoman Cindie Perry said no one from the Public Works Department was available Monday to comment.

In a later interview, Garcia said he had a “great” meeting Monday afternoon with Riverside Police Lt. Dan Hoxmeier, City Councilman Paul Davis, Community Police Review Commission Director Frank Hauptmann and CPRC member Robin Jackson. Garcia said afterward that he appreciated being able to address his group’s concerns.

“We must let the community know what happened and how it happened,” Garcia said.

INVESTIGATION UPDATE

The officer was on routine patrol Sunday when the incident happened, Vicino said.

“We are reviewing in detail everything we can with his vehicle,” Vicino said, noting that the car’s onboard computer records, incoming and outgoing messages, audio and video recorders are all being looked at to determine whether anything might have distracted the officer.

The findings of the Police Department’s Major Accident Investigation Team will not be available for at least several days, he said.

“We feel deep sorrow for the victim and her family ... and we will work diligently to get some answers in this tragic accident,” Vicino said.

Cities have varying policies on investigating traffic accidents involving their police officers.

The California Highway Patrol will examine Corona accidents if it is available, Corona Sgt. Kim Velasco said. Otherwise, Corona’s major-accident team investigates, she said. The San Bernardino Police Department investigates its own accidents unless one happens outside the city or the officer did something “outright illegal,” Lt. Paul Williams said.

One of Pablo’s sons, Pedro Tomas, 41, operates a small store on Madison that sells snacks to the Guatemalan immigrants who live in Casa Blanca, he said. Tomas and a brother came to the United States 24 years ago from Guatemala and brought his mother here three years ago.

“The reason to bring her was to help her enjoy a dream come true,” Tomas said

Monday afternoon, an investigator for the attorney hired by the family took pictures of the accident scene. Tomas said, however, that he is not angry.

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