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Scrambling for Safety

An unconventional crosswalk strategy to help Chinatown's older pedestrians

One area where improvements could have a significant impact on the safety of older pedestrians is Oakland's Chinatown, which has a high concentration of older residents who make an unusually large number of trips on foot, compared to other older populations and the population at large.

In April of this year, the city installed an experimental pedestrian scramble at one Chinatown intersection, the corner of 8th and Webster Sts. A scramble gives pedestrians exclusive access to an intersection by stopping traffic from entering from all directions at the same time. That enables them to make diagonal crossings (hence, the term "scramble") and conventional crossings without coming into conflict with turning vehicles. The Traffic Safety Center is currently evaluating the Oakland scramble.

Community groups began their efforts to establish a scramble after the parent of a board member of Asian Health Services (AHS), a non-profit agency in Oakland's Chinatown, was killed in a traffic crash when using a crosswalk in the neighborhood. The Oakland Chinatown Coalition, which includes AHS, the Oakland Chamber of Commerce and the City of Oakland, implemented the project.

The effort spans agencies and age groups, explained Julia Liou, who is coordinating the project for AHS. After first working with youth groups on pedestrian safety, the project leaders began surveying older pedestrians in the area. They found that people didn't have enough time to make it across the intersection and that there were numerous conflicts between turning cars and pedestrians. (One of the streets feeds into a major arterial, the Posey tube, which goes to neighboring Alameda.)

AHS approached the Oakland City Council with its findings, and councilman Danny Wan, who represents the area, helped secure

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\$80,000 to implement some solutions. After studying the alternatives, and consulting extensively with the immediate community, and city traffic engineers, the Oakland Chinatown Coalition settled on the scramble as one tool. Once it was decided on, AHS embarked on another education effort to explain the concept.

"People have to know they can cross in any direction. They have to pay attention to the new signals, especially since so many of the street corners in Chinatown don't even have pedestrian signals. Using the scramble requires watching the pedestrian signals to know when to walk. Unlike the system before, there is one phase that stops cars in all directions and allows pedestrians from all corners to cross," Liou explained.

As part of the campaign, AHS created a brochure with pictographs showing how the signals work. They also worked with local young people to create a 12 by 4 ft. mural that is intended to highlight pedestrian safety issues and raise awareness of the new scramble system. (It is pictured on the front page of this issue.)

This is just the beginning of a longer-term effort, Liou said. With funding from Caltrans, AHS is working with the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce and the City of Oakland to devise a broader traffic safety plan for all of Chinatown.

