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Many seeing red over removed stop signs

Cities minimize stops to meet federal rules on traffic flow, safety

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The hours after school worry Patty Garcia the most.

The 32-year-old mother of six lives near Kennedy Elementary School in Livonia, and she's concerned about her children's safety.

Many of the stop signs that used to mark intersections closest to the city's schools, and others throughout the community, were removed over the last few years to comply with state traffic regulations. It makes her cringe, despite studies that say road safety has been improving in the city.

"It's been bad," she said. "I think it's definitely more dangerous after school."

Yet despite her concerns, Livonia is part of a growing trend in which metro Detroit communities are removing traffic signs or looking into it to change traffic flow so they can comply with federal guidelines the state adopted in 2005.

The Traffic Improvement Association, an Oakland County nonprofit group that assisted Livonia as it assessed its traffic patterns, began a pilot program on Thursday in Walled Lake to determine which traffic signs meet the guidelines and which should be removed or changed.

Grosse Pointe Woods has removed 18 stop signs since November, and Livonia police Sgt. Dave Studt, the person in charge of his city's traffic bureau, said Farmington Hills and Novi have expressed interest in Livonia's efforts.

While not discounting the concerns of Garcia and others, Studt defended the changes.

He said taking down the signs helped decrease the number of traffic crashes in the city from 13 per day in 2003 to about 6 in May, and average speeds dropped on several roads.

"By removing these stop signs, we've just made it safer for a pedestrian to cross the road," Studt said. He noted that drivers tend to roll through intersections without stopping completely when a street is oversigned or they speed between stop signs in order to make up time.

He said signs are removed only where they are unwarranted because of traffic flow and other factors.

While Livonia is basically finished removing stop signs -- Studt estimated as many as 1,500 stop signs have been removed since 2006 -- two intersections on Levan are under review for possible changes in their signage.

Joe Steele, chairman of the city's traffic commission, said even though he supports the sign removal program, residents can ask the commission to review sign removals at specific intersections.