



## **DISTRICT OR-1**

**PALMYRA JUNIOR-SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL--BENNET ELEMENTARY**

**P.O. BOX 130 PALMYRA, NE 68418 402-780-5327 [www.districtor1.org](http://www.districtor1.org)**

**Michael Hart**  
**Superintendent**

**Heath Johnson**  
**Secondary Principal**

**Linde Walter**  
**Elementary Principal**

**Aaron Hoeft**  
**Activities Director**

October 5, 2023

Mr. Brandon Varilek  
District 1 Engineer: Nebraska Department of Transportation  
1500 Nebraska Parkway  
Lincoln, NE 68502

Dear Mr. Varilek:

On behalf of District OR-1 staff, students, and families, the District OR-1 Board of Education, the Palmyra Village Board, and Palmyra area local emergency services and first responders, please accept this letter as a formal request for additional assistance and interagency collaboration to address a recurring and very serious public and school safety concern on Nebraska Highway 2. This concern centers around the continued number of vehicle accidents and unsafe road conditions near the village of Palmyra. This includes the intersection of Hwy 2 and I Street, the east entrance to Palmyra, and the intersection of Hwy 43 and Hwy 2 west of Palmyra.

Although I am relatively new to the community and in my fourth year as Superintendent, I am very aware that this concern has been in place and discussed for many years preceding my arrival. During my tenure in the district, I have talked with a multitude of citizens who have experienced a very personal connection to many of these tragic accidents. I have also witnessed the collective pain experienced by students, family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbors over loved ones being seriously injured or killed in accidents in this area. This grief is amplified by the frustration and anxiety experienced by many local leaders and citizens who (in the past) have oftentimes felt "shut out" or not actively heard by governmental agencies, state officials, and transportation department leaders. Over the years, a general feeling of disinterest and apathy has been perceived from these organizations when our community patrons try to discuss and brainstorm creative, cost effective, safe, practical, and sustainable solutions to this problem.

While I understand that we all are seemingly busier than ever, and there are plenty of other distractions that can deflect our attention and consume the limited resources we have available each day, the time for action and collaboration to address this serious safety issue is now!

This "call to action" is an opportunity for all of us to work together to help significantly reduce (or eliminate) future tragedies on this stretch of road, while at the same time increasing school and community safety in the Palmyra area. In order for our collaboration and this resolute "call to action" to be properly focused and be as effective as possible, additional context is warranted and the information that follows is intended to provide further evidence that this concern needs immediate attention and further study.

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In summary, this document is not intended to simply voice concerns; it also contains relevant facts about recent accidents, additional crash factors, and potential short and long-term solutions to address the problem.

Listed below is a chronological summary of some recent vehicle accidents that accentuate the urgent need for action. *Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of past accidents in this area.*

### Recent (2020-2023) Highlighted Accidents in the Palmyra Area Along Highway 2:

#### Wednesday, September 27th, 2023: Two Vehicle Collision

- Accident Summary:
  - The Nebraska State Patrol reported that a two-vehicle crash happened at the intersection of Highway 2 and I Street (just north of the Casey's Palmyra location).
  - An eastbound vehicle struck the driver's side of a northbound vehicle as it was attempting to cross the traffic at the intersection.
  - The driver of the northbound vehicle died at the scene.
  - Pictures of this accident are listed below:



#### Thursday, September 14th, 2023: Two Vehicle Collision

- Accident Summary:
  - This accident occurred at the Intersection of Hwy 2 and I Street (just north of the Casey's Palmyra location).
  - In this case, a northbound vehicle collided with an eastbound vehicle as the car was attempting to cross over several lanes of traffic.
  - An adult and 3 small children were in one of the vehicles.
  - No fatalities resulted from this accident.

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### Tuesday, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023: School Bus and Passenger Vehicle Collision

- Accident Summary:
  - The Nebraska State Patrol received a report of a crash involving a school bus and another vehicle approximately one mile east of Palmyra.
  - The school bus was westbound on Highway 2 when it was slowing to turn and a westbound vehicle collided with the rear of the bus causing it to roll onto its side.
  - All students aboard the bus and the bus driver were transported to a local Lincoln hospital with non-life threatening injuries.
  - No fatalities resulted from this accident.



### Friday, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023: Two Vehicle Collision

- Accident Summary:
  - The collision occurred at the intersection of Highway 2 and Nebraska Highway 43.
  - A vehicle was southbound on Highway 43 and attempted to turn east onto Highway 2. This vehicle was struck by another vehicle that was westbound on Highway 2.
  - One driver was pronounced dead at the scene.

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### **January 15, 2022: Two Vehicle Collision**

- Accident Summary

- The accident happened on Highway 2 east of Palmyra.
- According to the Otoe County Sheriff's Office, a vehicle was eastbound in an SUV when they collided head-on with a westbound freight truck in the westbound lane.
- One person in the SUV was killed and two others were taken to a local hospital with critical injuries.



### **Saturday, June 20, 2020: Motorcycle Crash.**

- Accident Summary:

- Emergency crews responded to a Highway 2 fatality crash near the Palmyra sale barn when a westbound motorcycle hit a pickup truck that was turning into the driveway of the Palmyra Livestock Market.
- The motorcyclist was killed and the pickup truck driver was taken to the hospital to be treated for non-life threatening injuries.

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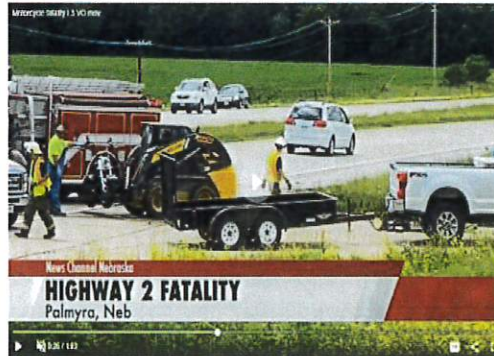
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### Additional Crash Factors

In addition to the overwhelming devastation associated with these highlighted crashes, there are other circumstances that help to amplify the “call for action” relative to highway safety in the Palmyra area. These additional crash factors are listed below:

- **Development and Usage of the Olson Athletic Sports Complex:**
  - This athletic complex (located just east of the Casey’s General Store in Palmyra) which opened in the fall of 2020 has increased traffic volume in this area due to more sporting events, practices, community events, and overall activity at the complex.
  - Additionally, as the complex begins to be utilized even more in the future for additional activities like youth track, soccer, baseball, etc., the traffic will continue to increase.
  - **Special note:** This increase in vehicle traffic is not contained to just the school year as the complex is used frequently throughout the spring, summer, and fall for other community activities.
- **Increased Student Enrollment at Palmyra Jr. / Sr. High School:**
  - Due to increased student enrollment and the expansion of capacity at the school building in Palmyra, we will continue to have an increasing number of students attend school in our district.
  - A byproduct of this recent increase in student enrollment is the fact that many of our students qualify for (and utilize) school permits due to the distance they live from school and travel to school.
  - These school permits mean that on any given school day, students as young as 14 years of age are navigating this stretch of highway. Our inexperienced drivers are having to deal with a myriad of traffic factors out of their control which could be safely mitigated with additional preventive traffic control measures in place.

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- **Presence of School Buses, Farm Equipment, and School Vehicles:**
  - Additionally, during the school year, we also experience an increase in bus traffic and school vehicles as we are hosting school activities and students and teams (from our district and surrounding districts) are being transported to and from the school each day.
  - Although these vehicles are clearly marked and utilize a wide variety of on-board safety mechanisms, this doesn't stop other drivers from not following laws regarding these vehicles.
  - The presence and limited mobility of farm equipment and heavy machinery on the highway (especially during harvest time in the fall and the inaccessibility of backroad bridges to facilitate alternate routes for these vehicles) also creates additional safety concerns. According to various anecdotal interviews, these identified highway safety concerns have also contributed to some families relocating to safer areas of the road.
- **Increased Distracted Driving:**
  - As much as we would like to think our local, state, and nation-wide safe driving initiatives are slowing the spread of this problem, the statistics say otherwise.
  - According to numerous research studies, the number of distracted drivers related to texting, cell phone usage, video watching, or just plain being distracted by the business of life while driving continues to rise. Because more drivers are distracted, this greatly increases the potential for future serious accidents.
  - Moreover, distracted drivers in a school area exponentially increases the possibility of a tragedy occurring on this section of the highway.
- **Posted Speed Limits and Environmental Factors**
  - Especially at the intersection facing the west near the Casey's General Store, the sun setting in the afternoon greatly reduces visibility and can also negatively skew driver reaction times (especially during after-school hours or after-school activities) and students are leaving the area. Conversely, eastbound traffic visibility also contains similar risk factors in the morning.
  - These environmental factors and chances for an accident are amplified significantly when this limited visibility is further decreased due to fog, rain, smoke, hail, snow, sleet, high winds, or any type of severe weather.
  - Additionally, even without the added environmental factors, drivers often find it difficult to accurately judge the overall speed of vehicles (especially when vehicles are traveling at 70 mph or higher approaching this intersection from the west) and even a slight misjudgment of speed, combined with a driver forgetting to check and recheck road clearance before moving into traffic increases the potential for tragedy.

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- **Addition of the Southeast Bypass:**

- Although the bypass is west of Bennet, the Palmyra intersection is the first major intersection east of the bypass without an overpass or improved traffic control measures.
- Even though the eastbound lanes of traffic have a right hand turn lane to use as vehicles approach the village, it is simply not enough as the increased volume of trucks and vehicles unfamiliar with the area traveling at higher rates of speed increases the probability for future accidents. These drivers are simply not aware of the demographics of the community and the presence of a school in this area.

### **Possible Solutions and Future Action Steps:**

It is fair to believe that if a concern of this nature is communicated, then the concern should contain options for resolution and proactive measures to mitigate and eliminate future concerns. Listed below are some possible options for sustainable and practical solutions to help alleviate our safety concerns. As a school district leader, I would welcome the opportunity for more discussion and feedback on these potential options moving forward.

- **Organization of Community Task Force:**

- One of the first potential steps might be to organize a Community Task Force dedicated to further study and analysis of this issue. A collaborative partnership with a safety-driven focus made up of local leaders, selected community patrons, and experts in highway safety and design would be a great first step to finding the best solution.
- A follow-up to the organization of a Community Task Force might be to conduct a Town Hall Meeting or Community Input Summit to share results and plan future action steps with community input.

- **Continuing Education about Safe Driving, Distracted Driving, and Road Safety:**

- In collaboration with the Otoe County Sheriff's Office, potential local business partnerships, the Nebraska Department of Transportation, and our local school system, additional training and continuing education classes could be offered to our students and interested patrons as soon as possible regarding road and vehicle safety.
- These information sessions could even be hosted at the high school building.

### **Potential Traffic Control Measures:**

*"Please note that the information listed below are various "draft" suggestions of possible options that could be considered to increase traffic safety in the Palmyra area.*

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### The enhancement of the “right hand only” turn lane southwest of the east entrance to the village of Palmyra:

- A limited “right hand only” turn lane does exist in this area, but lengthening the approach west to east would greatly assist eastbound vehicles in safely turning south from the east edge of Palmyra.

### An “acceleration lane” added to the southeast side of the east entrance to the village of Palmyra:

- Similar to the “right hand only” turn lane mentioned previously, this “acceleration lane” would allow vehicles leaving the east entrance and turning east an opportunity to slowly merge into oncoming eastbound traffic instead of quickly accelerating to the high rate of speed of approaching eastbound vehicles.

### Additional lighting added to the intersection of Highway 2 and I Street:

- Adding additional lighting may also provide increased visibility for vehicles leaving the Highway 2 and I Street intersection heading north and then west.

### Increased Law Enforcement Monitoring:

- An increased physical law enforcement presence whenever possible or enhanced electronic enforcement may help to encourage drivers to slow down and increase their vigilance on this section of the road.

### Flashing Active Alert Warning Signals:

- This traffic control measure could quickly be put in place and is more cost effective than some of the more comprehensive options presented later in the document.
- These active warning signals would alert drivers from both the east and west side of Palmyra that they are entering a school zone or an area that is dangerous for cross traffic.
- These signals could also be programmed to intensify at different times of the day or at certain times of the year (start of school, etc.) to increase situational awareness for drivers.
- These warning signals (as pictured below) could be placed at a variety of designated high-visibility locations to help slow down traffic and reduce speed in this area.



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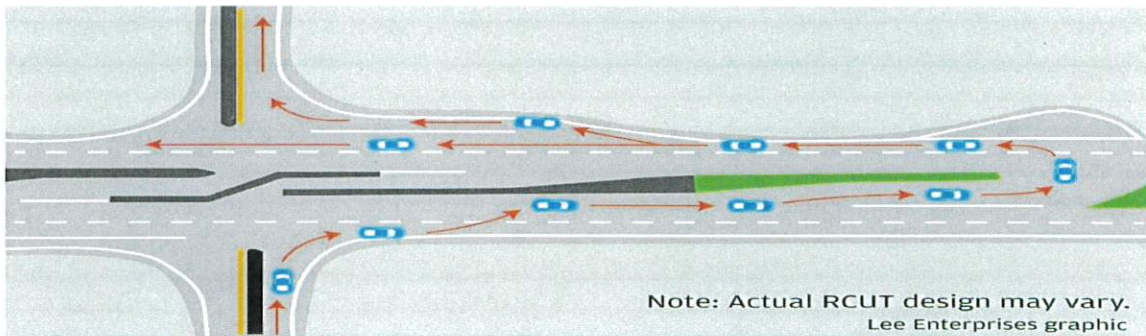
Aaron Hoeft  
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### R-CUT (Restricted Crossing U-Turn) or Modified R-Cut Traffic Control Measure:

- Although this may be a more comprehensive and long term traffic control measure, this option is more cost effective than the total road reconstruction involved in the addition of an overpass.
- **What is an R-Cut?** According to Alan Swanson, NDOT Traffic Analysis Engineer at a presentation provided to North Bend Central students on May 9, 2023, *"The RCUT intersections significantly reduce the potential for crashes by allowing drivers to focus on one direction of traffic."* Swanson added, *"This is accomplished by requiring motorists approaching the divided highway from the side road to turn right and then make a U-turn at a designated median opening."*
- According to Swanson, the R-CUT intersection forces a change in how drivers cross and turn onto the highway from side roads, and how these intersections have been shown to decrease right-angle crashes on four-lane divided highways.
- *"By not allowing left turns or cross traffic, drivers don't need to wait for a gap in both directions to cross the highway,"* Swanson said. *"There is less delay than with the use of a traffic signal or crossing both sets of traffic lanes. Drivers turning left from side roads will also find it quicker, easier, and safer to focus on one direction of traffic at a time."*
- Consideration of this option (or a variation of the option) would also have to be designed to minimally impact local businesses and the economic infrastructure of the village.
- The diagram below depicts the structure and design of a similar traffic control measure in place in northeast Nebraska (near the town of Humphrey) at the intersection of Hwy 81 and Hwy 91.

### **An indirect route to safety**

All traffic intending to cross four lanes of a divided highway would be forced to turn right at the RCUT intersection, then make a U-turn and another right turn to continue their route.



- A similar intersection modification has also been implemented near North Bend, Nebraska.

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In summary, engaged citizens and local patron input is crucial to addressing these types of community safety concerns and I am confident that together we can work collaboratively to find viable, cost-effective solutions that will help to ease community frustration, increase citizen engagement, and minimize the number of tragedies that may occur in this section of roadway in the future.

Thank you again for your prompt attention to this matter and we look forward to discussing this topic with you in more detail in the very near future.

My email is [hart.mic@districtor1.net](mailto:hart.mic@districtor1.net) or you can call the high school office at (402) 780-5327 if you have further questions.

Professionally,



Michael T. Hart

Superintendent of Schools

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