

St. Petersburg Times

Fire rescue: Speed humps slow response

By Jared Loene, Times Staff Writer
Published February 22, 2008

After 30-foot flames consumed Bill Morris' lakeside house, county traffic officials asked firefighters: Did speed humps make their job more difficult?

Yes, according to a report that Hillsborough Fire Rescue sent to the county office of traffic services.

Officials think the fire, triggered by a backyard barbecue, would have destroyed the house regardless of the road conditions.

Still, they say that speed humps and other traffic-calming devices slow responders.

Mike McCarthy, county director of traffic services, is recommending that the county improve the visibility of all speed humps and speed bumps on county roads.

Crenshaw Lake Road, which leads to Morris' house, received traffic-calming devices as the community prepared for the arrival of Idlewild Baptist Church at Van Dyke Road near N Dale Mabry Highway.

Neighbors feared that the megachurch would create cut-through traffic on their road, which links Dale Mabry with U.S. 41. After more than two years of meetings and a vote, Crenshaw Lake Road area homeowners got a combination of eight speed cushions and speed tables spaced along one part of the road.

The bumps slow emergency responders by at least 10 seconds each, according to a report from fire Capt. Jeffrey Martin. Emergency vehicles must slow almost to a stop to cross them.

Fire rescue had to travel that part of the road to respond to the fire at 1205 Lake Charles Circle on Dec. 10. The first firefighters arrived less than eight minutes after the distress call of 10:08 p.m., but it was too late.

Firefighters immediately took a defensive stand. By the time the fire was contained, the inferno left a burned-out shell of the 6,200-square-foot house and an estimated \$1.5-million in damage, according to fire investigators.

Martin wrote that any traffic-calming device, even the lower speed cushion, poses a problem for emergency vehicles.

"You very rarely get a clean pass," he wrote in the report, dated Jan. 23. "Invariably, as you attempt to negotiate them, someone in the opposing lane fails to yield, taking away the center cut out option."

Morris, who lived in the neighborhood for four years, said he often worried what would happen if an emergency crew had to drive through his street.

"I think that the speed humps could literally mean the difference between life and death. All you have to do is drive up and down and see that," Morris said. "Always, it was talked about in our lake association. It wasn't like all of a sudden a light went off cause a house burned up around the lake."