PHOTO BY JIM KNOWLES

Gas station customer Rick Rodgers tells county officials how difficult it is to get into the 76 station on Lewelling Boulevard since the median was built to beautify the boulevard.

By Jim Knowles

San Leandro Times

Lewelling Boulevard in San Lorenzo is getting beautified, but a gas station owner says it’s not a pretty picture for business.

The boulevard is undergoing an $11-million improvement with new sidewalks, landscaping and a median that makes it look prettier.

But the median is causing a 50-percent drop in business at the 76 station, says the owner, because cars can’t make a left-hand turn into the business.

The gas station owners want the county to make a cut in the median, so cars going westbound on Lewelling can drive into their station.

“Our business is down 50 percent,” said Rishu Sood, who runs the station with his father, Ramesh Sood. “Westbound traffic can’t get in. That’s 50 percent of our business right there. It’s simple math.”

The county has proposed to solve the problem by allowing U-turns down the street at the corner of Lewelling and Hesperian boulevards, but Sood says that won’t help.

“If you’re looking for a gas station, you’re not going to make a U-turn,” Sood said. “You’re going to keep on going to the next gas station.”

Sood said the boarded up Taco Bell down Lewelling has already closed and there are rumors of other stores closing.

But the county is sticking with the median and giving the U-turn a try.

“Any time you put in a median it changes traffic patterns,” said Daniel Woldesenbet, director of public works for Alameda County.

The county says a median has certain advantages – it makes the street safer and it looks nicer.

And if one business demands a cut in the median for left turns, every business along the boulevard will want one, said Woldesenbet.

“The best solution we can accommodate you is a U-turn at the intersection,” Woldesenbet told Sood at his 76 station last Friday morning.

The county project is the result of what the public wanted after numerous meetings, Woldesenbet said.

“The decision is made,” Woldesenbet said. “This is how it’s going to be right now. The only thing to change will be the U-turn.”

But as Woldesenbet discussed it with Sood at length, at times he did suggest there could be a little leeway.

“The current decision is to stay the way it is,” Woldesenbet said. “You don’t want to lose business. So we’ll look at solutions. People wanted beautification. Sometimes you make an oversight. We have to correct those things.”

Some gas station customers agreed with the station owner.

“They threw common sense out the window,” said Rick Rodgers a customer and contractor who pulled up in his pickup. “Try to make it nice but don’t hurt businesses doing it.”

Rodgers raised another question pulling out of the station.

“How do I get to the freeway?” he asked.

You can’t turn westbound from the station onto Lewelling to head toward the freeway, and going eastbound makes it a long and circuitous route to get back in the westbound lanes.

Cars and trucks are now going around the block behind the station on the residential streets and that’s a hazard for the kids playing in the area, Rodgers and others say.

He adds that his wife can’t cross Lewelling at Usher anymore in her wheelchair, since the median blocks the path.

But people wanted beautification and the landscaped median is a part of that project, Woldesenbet said.

“We’ll keep is as it is for now but we don’t want to lose any businesses,” he said.