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by Laura McCutcheon Sonoma West Staff Writer laura@sonomawest.com |

Alcohol not believed to be a factor

A pedestrian died on April 9 after being struck by a car when crossing the street.

Frederic Ernst, a 69-year-old Sebastopol resident was in a lighted crosswalk on Healdsburg Avenue, walking toward Murphy Avenue, when shortly before 7 p.m., Ajatha Bollmann, 75, of Occidental, hit him with her vehicle.

Sebastopol Police officers arrived on scene within one minute and found Ernst dead in the roadway, according to police.

An investigation is underway. Bollmann is cooperating with police and at this point, there is no indication of alcohol or drug use on the part of the driver or the pedestrian, Police Chief Jeff Weaver said. Police also do not have any reason to believe Bollmann was speeding at the time of the accident, he said, noting the investigation is still in its early stages.

“The driver was very distraught and very concerned about the wellbeing of the person she struck, and when she learned he had died she was further distraught,” Weaver said.

This is the third fatal pedestrian collision in the past 20 years in the city of Sebastopol, according to Weaver, who said there was a fatal pedestrian collision in October 1994 on Gravenstein Highway North, and there was also a fatal pedestrian collision in January 2004, which like the most recent accident, occurred on Healdsburg Avenue.

In a separate incident, which happened in July 2009, a pedestrian was crossing Healdsburg Avenue at Florence Avenue in a crosswalk, and she was struck by a vehicle and sustained major injuries.

At that time the crosswalk was not lighted.

As part of the Safe Streets Sebastopol program, crosswalk improvements — which included flashing lights — intended to increase pedestrian safety, were made at 15 locations throughout downtown over the last several years.

However, the multimillion dollar project — funded by federal grants and the countywide safe tax Measure M — in of itself does not eliminate the need for motorists and pedestrians to be mindful of each other.

“Pedestrians should not depend on the improvements to provide their safety,” Sebastopol City Manager Larry McLaughlin said. “Pedestrians and motorists should still be vigilant at all times, just as they would if those improvements had never taken place. ... This is not a statement with regard to (the) accident. That is still under investigation and we do not yet know all the details.”

About 105 Fircrest Mobile Home Park seniors and 43 families had been working for nearly a decade to see a lighted crosswalk installed on

Highway 116 to safely bridge their community to the shopping center across the street. Their efforts materialized in January.

That particular crosswalk has a long and bumpy history, starting in 2006 when a man in a motorized wheelchair was struck by a vehicle, according to Fircrest Homeowner's Association President Karilee Shames, who led the latest effort to get a LightGuard Smart Crosswalk System put in at the location. A LightGuard Smart Crosswalk System is a system of flashing lights that are embedded in the roadway at crosswalks to warn motorists when people are crossing.

"Our number one citizen complaint or comment is about traffic; about the difficulty moving around the perceived danger of traffic in town, especially from the pedestrians," Sebastopol Police Capt. James Conner said.

Traffic collision data gathered by the California Office of Traffic Safety ranks Sebastopol's collision rates against the collision rates of other similar-sized jurisdictions in the state.

In 2011, Sebastopol ranked sixth highest out of 66 jurisdictions of similar size, when it came to the number of pedestrians killed or injured (which in 2011 involved no fatalities), according to Conner, who cited the report from COTS.

Sebastopol was 18th highest in total bicyclists injured and fifth highest in injured bicyclists under 15 years of age, he said.

"Speed related collisions, meaning speed was the primary or most important associated factor that caused the collision, was fourth highest and our hit and run experience was 14th highest," Conner said, referring to all types of collisions, not just those involving pedestrians. "That is the reason we work so diligently at speed enforcement, because that is the single highest reason for our injury collisions. The hit and run rate is important to note because studies have shown the involved drivers are primarily unlicensed or suspended, or under the influence."

In 2009 Sebastopol ranked the second highest out of 70 jurisdictions of similar size when it came to the number of pedestrians killed or injured, he said at the time.

The California Highway Patrol also collects collision data, including pedestrian involved collisions that occurred in the city of Sebastopol on either Highway 12 or Highway 116, both of which are patrolled not only by local police, but by the CHP. The following statistics do not include pedestrian collisions on any other city streets, only on Sebastopol's two major highways.

Between 2002 and 2011, 61 people were injured in pedestrian collisions. Provisionally, another eight pedestrians were injured in 2012 and 2013, bringing the total number of people injured in pedestrian collisions to 69. The numbers for 2012 and 2013 are provisional because reports for 2012 and 2013 are not yet complete.

"Our downtown core is intersected by two heavily traveled state highways, so for a small town we have a very high traffic volume," Weaver said. "If you are going to cross any major street, you are crossing a pretty heavily traveled street so it makes it a greater issue in our community than it might be in similar-sized communities elsewhere," he said, noting, it's not unusual for the police department to get calls from people who are concerned because motorists didn't yield to them in a crosswalk.

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