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'Smart' traffic signals coming to Port Orange, DeLand

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PORT ORANGE — Something must be wrong with the traffic signals.

To Kimberly Dotson, it's the only way to explain why she's forced to stop so frequently — and for so long — through several red and green light cycles at the same intersection on Dunlawton Avenue.

"I sit at the light waiting to go and it will change (red again) after only letting three cars through," she said. "That tells me the timing is off. Three cars is not enough."

The problem that frustrates Dotson and many other motorists who pack the east-to-west corridor stems from outdated technology. Conventional traffic lights — the standard in Volusia, everywhere in Flagler County and 90 percent of intersections throughout the country — operate based on signal timings that could have been set years ago and don't adapt to rush hour, economic growth along a roadway or traffic lulls. That's why you sometimes sit at a red light even though no cars are approaching the intersection and why a turn signal only stays green for a few seconds.

The good news: A better system that's rapidly spreading throughout the state is, coming, eventually, to

Dunlawton and State Road 44 in DeLand.

They are called adaptive, or "smart," traffic signals, and the devices are already in place along International Speedway Boulevard in Daytona Beach and U.S. Highway 17-92 in DeLand. They will be installed along two of Volusia's busiest roadways by 2020. State and local officials say they improve the flow of traffic and eliminate the situation that Dotson sees day in, day out.

"I hope people see the difference," said Lois Bollenback, the executive director of the River-to-Sea Transportation Planning Organization, the local body that prioritized the traffic light upgrades. "I think people will see that their blood pressures are a little lower."

It's unclear when State Road 40 in Ormond Beach — another congested east-west corridor — or Flagler County will see the improvements, but Bollenback said the planning board will continue to study the need.

"We are trying to put together a plan to see: Where can we have the biggest benefit and where can we go next?" she said.

A costly fix

On average, travelers spend 36 hours per year in traffic tie-ups. For urbanites, the number is much higher. Collectively, Americans spend nearly 4.2 billion hours sitting in backups, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

It leaves many wondering: Why don't traffic lights adjust to actual conditions?

Now they can. Studies show that adaptive signal control improves average performance metrics (travel time, control delay, emissions, and fuel consumption) by 10 percent or more. In systems with extremely outdated signal timing, and in places with heavy traffic, the improvement can be 50 percent or more, according to the Federal Highway Adminstration's website.

That website also says that the technology, while effective, is used on less than 1 percent of all signalized intersections, with cost being one of the main reasons for the slow rollout. The systems along ISB and 17-92 cost $2.08 million but also included other improvements to the highways. The implementation along Dunlawton and S.R. 44 is estimated to cost roughly $1.9 million.

"The costs are highly variable, and depend on numerous factors," Florida Department of Transportation district spokesman Steve Olson said. "There are several different types of adaptive systems that all have different installation and operational requirements."

In Florida, smart traffic signals began appearing in the early 2000s, first in Pasco, Pinellas and Hillsborough counties. By 2015 — the year the devices were installed on ISB — newspapers throughout the state had reports of "new signal systems" coming to roadways.

These systems are implemented on a case-by-case basis, FDOT officials said, and there are no plans to put adaptive signal systems on all state roadways.

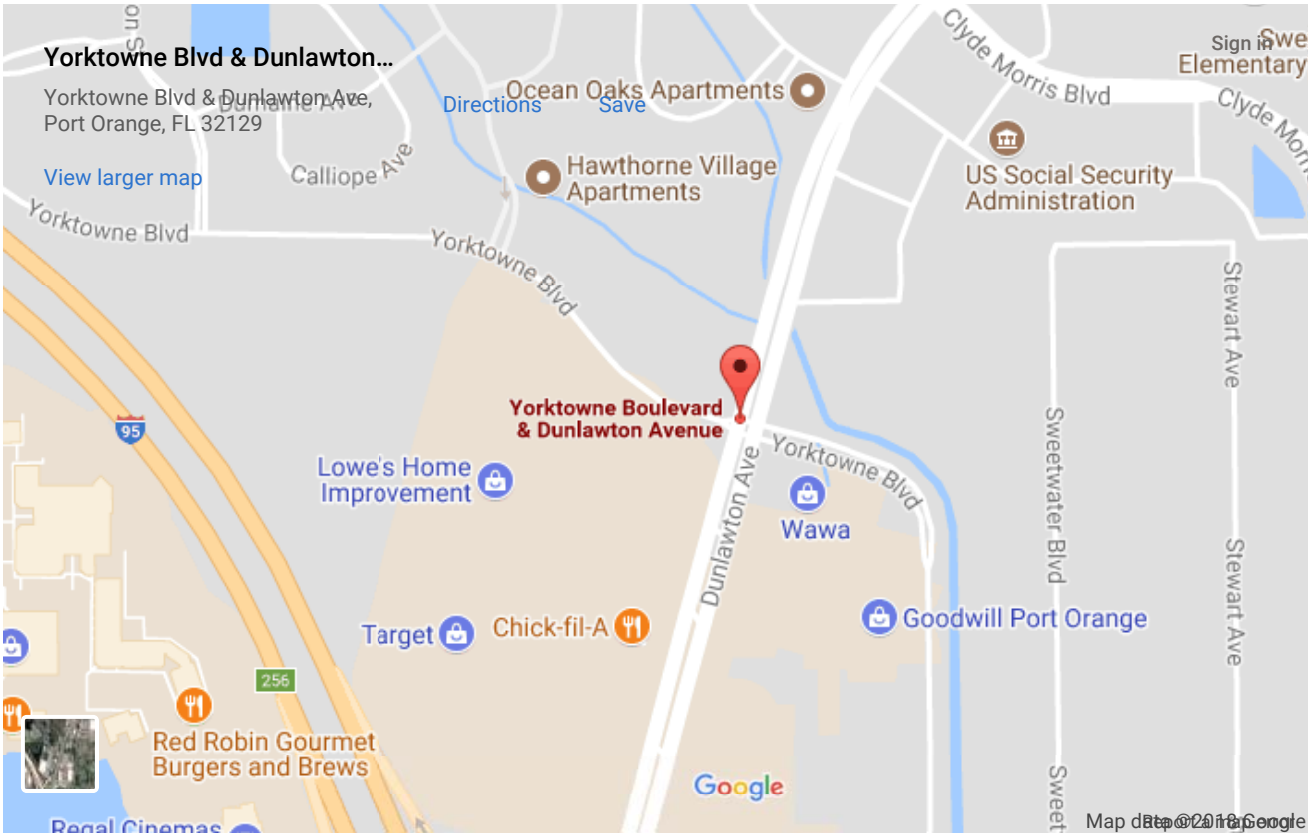
According to the Federal Highway Administration, the hardware can determine which lights should be red and which should be green by receiving and processing data from strategically placed sensors.

For Port Orange City Councilman Scott Stiltner, a retired police officer, Dunlawton traffic is the top complaint he hears from constituents. He's unsure if the new lights will untangle the snarls, but he's hopeful it will at least help motorists get where they need to go a lot quicker.

Look at "the time it takes from point A to point B when they go on Dunlawton, especially between Clyde Morris and Wllliamson (boulevards)," he said. "There are so many major intersections in such a short artery of highway."

It's so bad that Port Orange resident Joe Sauer uses a network of backroads to avoid Dunlawton whenever possible. Sometimes though — when he goes out to eat or shop — he winds up stuck, in more ways than one.

"You really see it heavy around 3:30 in the afternoon," he said of the traffic. While frustrating, "there's nothing you can do about it."



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