

IT'S THEIR CALL

Meet the people decide if you stop for a light, go to school if it snows, and more

Originally published in The Blade on Sunday, February 21, 2010

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

At some point you have to accept that you don't have control over some things in your life. The longer you think about it, the longer the list gets:

School cancellations, traffic light patterns, your home's value, what concerts come to town.

Then it hits you: You may not have control over them, but someone does. This is a story about a few of those people, the ones whose decisions, even the little ones, can have a big influence on your life and whose hidden power often affects you when you least expect it.



(BLADE ILLUSTRATION)

Let it flow

Consider Barb Jones. As traffic engineer for the city of Toledo, she can tell you all about progressive flow characteristics, signal phasing, and the "zero point," whatever that is. But as a driver trying desperately to get to work on time, here's all you really want to know:

"As a rule," she said, "on the [Anthony Wayne] Trail for example, if you are going higher than the designed speed, then you're going to have to brake at every intersection."

Major traffic systems like the Trail or Alexis Road are designed to flow smoothly, with green light after green light, as long as you drive at the right speed and are going in the right direction. The designed speed may be different from the posted speed and is based on average documented travel speeds on that particular road, Ms. Jones said.

There's a lot of work that goes into the timing of traffic signals and it involves everything from traffic counts to whether there are turn arrows and crosswalks. There also are special timing plans for different parts of the day — one, say, for getting people downtown to work in the morning, another for getting them away from downtown after work, and a third for normal hours.

That's not to say that unexpected changes in the environment, such as a new business that increases traffic flow, could mess up the whole plan.

"I like to tell citizens that they are really the eyes and the ears. We cannot be everywhere at all times," Ms. Jones said. "If you see something that has changed, we could have a problem. Call."

As for her own route to work, is it a perk of the job that it always comes up green lights?

"I wish."

Let it snow

Any time there's talk of snow on the ground, John Foley becomes a very popular man.

"There are a lot of influential people who would like me to cancel school," said the superintendent of Toledo Public Schools.

His nieces and nephews have pleaded, teachers have jokingly offered bribes. As any parent knows, though, the

ripple effect of whatever decision Mr. Foley makes impacts far more than the district's 26,000 students and 3,500 staffers. There are parents suddenly in need of babysitters when school closes and employers who find attendance down.

"Once we make that call, half the people are happy and half the people are unhappy," Mr. Foley said.

The run-up to "the call" often begins around 4 a.m., when people from the district go out and test the roads if the weather service has alerted them to potentially bad weather. A series of individuals discuss recommendations before Mr. Foley makes a decision.

Still, there are no clear rules regarding what conditions need to exist for TPS to cancel school. The issue is influenced by the fact that buses travel city streets and also by all the students who walk to school. Mr. Foley said school closed two weeks ago because streets weren't clear enough for buses and uncleared sidewalks put pedestrians in the street.

"The decision is always what's best for the safety of the kids," he said.

Complicating matters can be the timing of a storm. By 6 or 7 a.m., buses start hitting the streets to pick up students. Likewise, there can be concern if bad conditions are predicted toward the end of the school day, as was also the case two weeks ago.

No matter what happens with snow days, Mr. Foley and his cabinet still go to work for business as usual, although there are usually a few things to take care of first if classes are canceled.

"Probably for the first hour we take complaints," he said.

What's it worth?

For Lee Omev, your home's value begins with a giant tape measure.

The appraiser with the Lucas County Auditor's Office spends his days — bitterly cold at this point of the year — outside snapping pictures of homes with a digital camera, then calculating or verifying the measurements of the building and creating or updating a rough sketch of its dimensions.

He is one of about a dozen staffers who are charged with appraising new houses and fixing data for existing ones (which happens after a citizen calls a change or correction to the office's attention). On top of that, every six years he gets to help with the monumental task of reappraising every one of the county's 200,000 parcels as mandated by state law.

The process works like this: Mr. Omev visits each property in person, marking down all sorts of things. He notes the number of bathrooms, whether or not it has air-conditioning, and most important of all, square footage. If no one is home, he makes an educated guess based on what he can see from the outside and certain tell-tale structural signs; owners can call in a correction later.

Back in the office, those figures are fed into a computer that considers them — along with location and sales in that area over the last three years — and then, to really simplify things, assigns a value.

Mr. Omev does his best to soothe the feelings of those he meets on the job, but there are limits to what he can do, despite the wishes of one homeowner who good-naturedly asked him just for one thing: "Keep my value up. Lower my taxes."

Music makers

As much as Steve Miller likes Jimmy Buffett, there's no way the master of Margaritaville is coming to perform at the Lucas County Arena.

"It's a function of routing and it's a function of cost," said Mr. Miller, general manager of SMG, the firm that runs the arena.

Financially, artists expect to make a certain amount per show, so divide that by the number of available seats available and you've got an idea of what the ticket prices would have to be to make it work. In Buffett's case, entry to Toledo's 8,000-seat arena might have to sell for at least \$150, too expensive for these parts, Mr. Miller said.

Then consider routing, or how a band gets from here to there. Usually, a group doesn't like to travel more than six hours a night, so booking them might depend on finding a date when they're on their way to or from a place like Cleveland or Pittsburgh, Mr. Miller said.

Once those two things are known, with help from agents and promoters, then one can start targeting acts that fit the community. It may not be surprising to learn that Toledo has an exceptional love of country and classic rock. Mr. Miller said he tries to find diverse acts to keep everyone happy, but ultimately it comes down to selling tickets. So just because you'd love to see the '80s band Kajagoogoo, keep in mind that not everyone else would.

"The challenge that I think some people have is that they have an understanding that their favorite artist is going to sell this many tickets where in reality they're not necessarily going to sell as many tickets as they think," he said. "Those are the difficult decisions that I have to make."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)