Help in Store for Dangerous S.F. Intersections

New stoplights, more lag time at problem corners

By Mi Young Pae
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To safeguard San Francisco's worst intersections, city engineers plan to hang stoplights across busy driving lanes, install bigger lenses to catch the eye of each driver and allow more lag time between light changes to help clear congested cross streets.

The changes, prompted by a long look at accident totals across the city, aim to help drivers who often complain that they cannot see traffic lights on cluttered sidewalks. The timing changes, calling for a one- or two-second delay with red lights in all directions, are designed to reduce the danger when a driver slides through an intersection on the tail end of a yellow light.

The plans were drawn up by the Traffic Engineering Department and will be sent to the Parking and Traffic Commission next week.

"One big difference between San Francisco and other cities in California is that San Francisco has narrower streets that were built in preautomobile days," said traffic engineer Jack Lucero Fleck, who wrote the report. "With narrower streets, narrower intersections, there's very little room for error."

There are more intersections and a higher volume of cars on the streets in San Francisco because there are not many freeways, Fleck said.

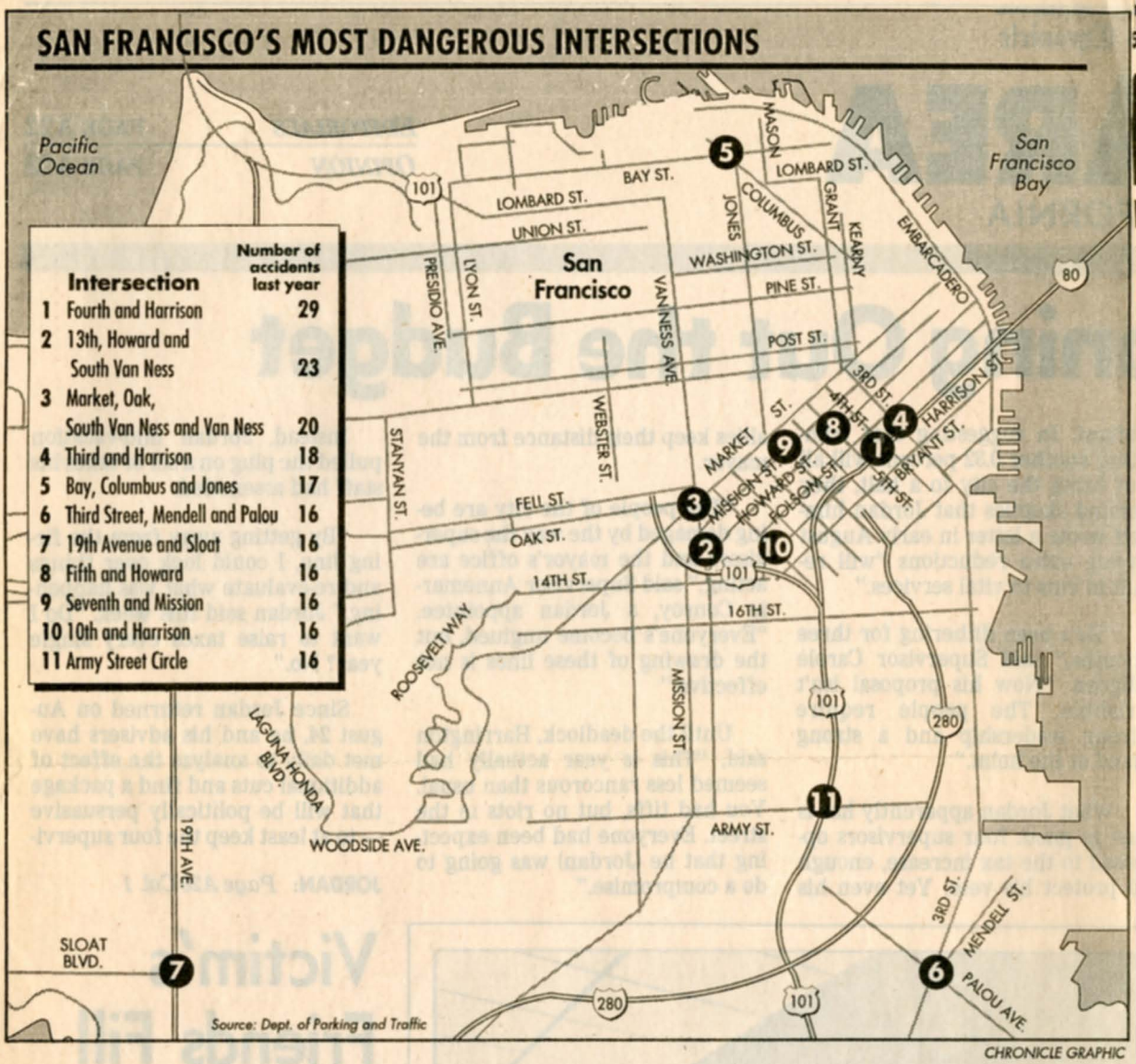
He noted that the number of injury accidents last year — 5,390 — was the lowest in 15 years.

The city's most accident-prone intersection is Fourth and Harrison, which had 29 accidents last year.

The maze-like corner at 13th Street, Howard and South Van Ness came in second with 23 accidents. The intersection of Market and Van Ness had the third highest number of accidents with 20 last year and also is the worst intersection for pedestrians. Eight people were injured in crosswalks.

To improve signal visibility and safety at these and other high-accident intersections, the city plans to install 12-inch signal lenses to replace the eight-inch size. Engineers also want more "mast arm" signals that extend over the lanes and will phase in an "all-red" one-

INTERSECTIONS: *Page A20 Col. 1*



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INTERSECTIONS: S.F.'s Dangerous Corners

From Page A19

to two-second lag time between light changes.

The city will also add the all-red interval to six other intersections with high numbers of "right-angle" accidents, in which cars running stoplights have broadsided other vehicles. These cross streets are: San Bruno and Silver, 25th Avenue and Clement, Columbus and North Point, Seventh and Mission, 14th Street and South Van Ness, and Leavenworth and Sutter.

San Francisco has an unusually high rate of right-angle accidents, which account for 20 percent of all traffic accidents in the city, according to the California State Automobile Association.

The city experiences almost 20 times more right angle accidents than the state average — 371 annually per 100,000 people in San Francisco versus 19 per 100,000 statewide, the insurance firm said.

"San Francisco does not have disproportionately more intersections, so it suggests that drivers in San Francisco are a little more careless when they enter an intersection than other motorists in the state," said Barry Shiller, a representative with the insurance firm. "It means entering an intersection is a lot more risky in San Francisco than other cities in California."

According to the city, the biggest improvement in 1993 was the intersection of Pine and Presidio, which had the highest accident rate in the city for the last five years but no longer makes it into the top 25. The intersection averaged 14 accidents for the last five years but reported only six accidents in 1993.

New signals hanging over driving lanes were installed last year and are credited for reducing accidents.