

Residents take dim view of LED lighting



Burnt Store Road in Cape Coral on Tuesday evening. Some residents are upset about the brightness and color temperature of the new lighting system. They say it is affecting wildlife, including burrowing owls, and bleeding onto homeowners' yards. ANDREW WEST/THE NEWS-PRESS

They want county to take down new street lamps along Burnt Store Road

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Ask Jamie Francisco about the roadway renovation that changed her life, and she has some comparisons at the ready:

If they were a sound; they'd be a freight train.

If they were a smell, they'd be a cadaver.

But they're street lamps –132 light-emitting diode pole-top fixtures she and about 500 others who live along a two-mile stretch of Burnt Store Road in Cape Coral say are the worst thing to

ever happened to their neighborhood.

Likening them to illumination better suited for a Walmart parking lot, an airstrip or a prison yard, Francisco and her neighbors have been begging Lee County to muffle or replace them almost since the switch was flipped last Christmas Eve.

It's hard to overstate how much Francisco and some other area residents hate the new lights, part of a

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\$1.7 million roadway improvement project that includes a multi-use path. It's that path that started the trouble, said resident Tom Howard; or rather the county's attempt to make it safe at night.

Even though Lee County officials say they dimmed the lights to 60% of their original brightness earlier this year, residents say that hardly made a difference. Plus, it didn't solve the problem of "light trespass," which is when glare intrudes into places it's not needed or wanted.

"The eye only perceives (the reduction) as about 25% and it didn't cure the problem at all," said Howard.

He, Francisco and other residents are banding together to get the county to change or replace the LEDs. So far, they've started a petition with 500 signatures, built a website and last week, delivered a bound, 200-plus-page plea, complete with tables, charts and an engineering report to Lee County commissioners and staff. The city of Cape Coral can't help, Howard said, because Burnt Store is a county road.

If these efforts don't work, they're looking at hiring a lawyer.

The Lee County Department of Transportation is reviewing the report, said communications specialist Tim Engstrom, but did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Beyond leaking into residents' bedrooms and turning night into day, studies have shown that bright lights like these can disturb what's called circadian rhythms, the body's internal clock. And disrupted sleep can cause a host of health problems – both physical and mental.

"At first glance, one might think that this type of lighting makes us safe because it is so bright," wrote Mark Baker of Soft Lights, a national advocacy group that works to highlight the potential harm caused by LEDs, in an email. "However, in reality, the high energy blue wavelength photons from these street lights cause glare and permanent eye damage, making it much harder to drive safely."

What residents find noxious about these new lights is something called their color temperature – or where on the visible light spectrum a bulb's output falls. It's measured in units called Kelvins. Commonly used high-pressure



Traffic moves along Burnt Store Road in Cape Coral on Tuesday evening. Some residents are upset with the brightness and color temperature of the new lighting system. They say it is affecting wildlife, including burrowing owls, along with bleeding onto homeowners' yards. PHOTOS BY ANDREW WEST/THE NEWS-PRESS

sodium lamps glow a warm orange that advocates say is most human- and environment-friendly. But the new fixtures on Burnt Store Road fall closer to the blue end of the spectrum.

Scientists have long warned that bright artificial night lighting harms wildlife. They can disorient sea turtle hatchlings, disrupt night-breeding amphibians and disturb migrating or nesting birds, including the protected burrowing owls that nest in Burnt Store Road's medians, says Pascha Donaldson of Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife.

It disturbs nearby nesting humans as well, Francisco says. She had to install hurricane shutters on her house so that she could sleep.

"The light invasion coming from these new lights completely floods my front and back yards, and our home by trespassing through all of our home's windows all night long," she wrote in a sharp letter to Lee commissioners. "These lights are not a calm, soft light that enhances the area. They are a harsh, bright, blinding light that floods out any sense of privacy or outdoor enjoyment. I can no longer sit on my lanai in the evening without being blinded by these lights. We cannot enjoy the sense



A burrowing owl nest is seen in the median along Burnt Store Road in Cape Coral on Tuesday near LED street lights.

of peace that comes from the night sky because our yard is lit up like we built our home in the middle of a Walmart parking lot."

She invited commissioners to come see for themselves.

"Please," she wrote, "Come sit on my lanai for a night. Come see the bright lights that flood my yard and home. Try to sleep in my home with no shutters to block the light. And please pray we don't have a house fire because chances for escape have been cut in half thanks to

these horrible street lights."

Relief may be on the way, if a California precedent applies here. In Davis, resident complaints about similar fixtures resulted in their being changed.

And, Howard says, though their problem might seem isolated now, he warns that as the county replaces its old mercury vapor light with LEDs, other neighborhoods might be facing the same thing.

"It's a quality of life issue that is of interest to everyone," he said.