

# Sense of Security: Priceless

## Crossing Guard Stands Sentry in Montgomery, at No Cost to County

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Volunteer crossing guard Jane B. Houston waves to some of her charges from her post on busy Seven Locks Road in Potomac. (Photos By Michael Robinson-Chavez -- The Washington Post)

For nearly a quarter century, Jane B. Houston has risen before dawn and spent six hours each school day working as an unpaid, self-appointed crossing guard. Two generations of children have progressed from Head Start to high school under her protective gaze.

She patrols a 60-yard stretch of shoulder along a busy road in Potomac, stopping traffic so students can get safely on and off their school buses. "Raining, shining, snow, freezing, hot -- she's always there," said Montgomery County school bus driver Leticia Cerritos.

Houston's tale, one of long hours spent on sometimes ice-patched asphalt, is intertwined with her community's efforts to protect its pedestrians. And like her community, she feels the county has taken her for granted, overlooked her, driven by too fast.

Houston lives in Scotland, an enclave of working-class leanness tucked away amid the million-dollar homes of Potomac. It was founded in the 1880s by freed slaves and redeveloped in the 1970s into a 10-acre community of 100 compact townhouses just off Seven Locks Road.

As Seven Locks has turned from country road to commuter thoroughfare, community leaders have found Montgomery officials slow in responding to their requests for a signal or some other means of stemming traffic. "They didn't care," said Bette C. Thompson, longtime president of the Scotland Community Civic Association.

County leaders say that they do care and that by the end of this month they will create a crosswalk to help residents of Scotland and a neighboring subdivision, Inverness North, get to the other side of Seven Locks Road. Thompson said she is disappointed that the proposed crosswalk does not include a traffic signal or a blinking light.

County officials say they have never received a request for a traffic study from Scotland. Thompson's soft-voiced rebuttal: "Oh, please."

In the absence of county help, Scotland has relied on Houston to make sure its children are safe. "Your service to God and the Community truly shines," reads an acrylic trophy she received from the civic association in August. "We appreciate you!"

Houston doesn't recall exactly when she began her Seven Locks labors. Her neighbor Olivia Lee, who moved into the community in 1982, said Houston has been at her roadside duty station at least since then. "This is a remarkable woman," Lee said, "to volunteer for 25 years." Jurl Mattocks, also a neighbor, calls Houston "a lifesaver for the kids."

Houston retired from office work for the federal government in the early 1980s. Her four children rode county school buses, but Houston said she couldn't see to only their safety. "If I help one, I help all."

Today she watches over at least 120 children from the two communities, including three of her seven grandchildren, meeting more than 20 buses a day.

She wears an orange vest over her coat, a white baseball cap and white gloves. To gain the attention of drivers, she sometimes blows her whistle in quick blasts that sound like the chirps of a militant bird defending her nest.

Short of stature but towering in self-esteem, Houston has no doubts about the value of her work. "The county should thank God for me being out here with these kids," she said.

**Montgomery's plan to put a crosswalk at Scotland followed a speech by Thompson at a meeting that County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) attended early last month. The gathering was organized by Action in Montgomery, a network of congregations that is gaining political influence in the county. Thompson spoke about the dangers of "Seven Locks highway," prompting a Duncan aide to approach her afterward and offer assistance.**

**That moment has brought Scotland some long-awaited attention.**

Arthur Holmes Jr., the county's director of public works and transportation, said he had visited the site as part of the planning for the crosswalk.

"We've been leaning forward in each instance," he said of the county's efforts to ensure safety in the area. But because Scotland Drive is a private road, he said, funding for a traffic signal there would have to come from the community.

In years past, Montgomery's improvements along Seven Locks Road have come near, yet not close enough, to addressing Scotland's needs.

In 1994, the county established a crosswalk at The Heights School, a private, Catholic institution for boys one-fifth of a mile south of Scotland. About an eighth of a mile north of Scotland, at Seven Locks and Bells Mill roads, the county installed a traffic signal in 2000.

A more recent effort comes even closer.

In November 2003, members of nine civic groups representing neighborhoods along Seven Locks Road, including Scotland, met with Montgomery County Council member Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac-Bethesda) to discuss the need for improved safety measures.

Denis pushed for the inclusion of a Seven Locks Road planning study in the five-year capital improvement budget the council approved in May 2004. The \$900,000 study, now underway, will lay the groundwork for bike lanes, sidewalks and left-turn lanes -- but not for any traffic control measures that would help Scotland in particular.

Even as the council was deliberating the budget, an accident illustrated the risks to Scotland's pedestrians. On March 30, 2004, a man was hit by a car after he got off a bus in front of the community. He died a week later.

The police concluded that the man was in error, according to county spokeswoman Esther Bowring, but Montgomery's Ride On bus service later shifted the location of its stop by about 25 yards.

"I certainly care" about Scotland's situation, Denis said. "Sometimes it's challenging to translate the needs into the reality that has to occur."

The children of Scotland and Inverness North treat Houston as a part of the landscape, as if every school bus stop had a crossing guard, but they are aware of the dangers that she shields them against.

"There are a lot of people who don't stop," said Sierra Vinson, an eighth-grader at Cabin John Middle School who lives at Inverness North, referring to motorists who drive illegally past stopped school buses. "She makes sure we get safe on the bus and that we get home safe."

One early morning last week, as four Walt Whitman High School students crossed a still-dark Seven Locks Road to get on their bus, a silver SUV slipped by them. "Come back here," Houston demanded, but the driver sped on, too fast for her to note the license number. One of the students tried to help by handing her a pencil.

Parents and grandparents also see Houston as a guardian. That same morning last week, Amie Kargbo brought her granddaughter to a tree where Scotland Drive meets Seven Locks Road. "Please don't forget this one for me," Kargbo said to Houston, referring to the pink-coated girl.

Now Houston has decided that she would like Montgomery County's high officialdom -- Duncan or perhaps the Board of Education, but in any event "somebody in charge" -- to take note of her years of labor and give her a Christmas bonus.

A little extra cash at this time of year would be nice; she said \$400 or maybe \$500 would be about right.

But Houston is not a "money greeder." She isn't asking for the \$12 to \$20 per hour that Montgomery pays its 169 official crossing guards.

The point is recognition. "Duncan should come down and see what I'm doing," she said.

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