



I-295, Route 42 interchange problems began in the 1950s



By [Jason Laday/South Jersey Times](#)

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Costing approximately \$900 million and expected to span eight years, the [overhaul of the I-295/Rte. 45/I-76 interchange](#), the busiest in the region and notoriously tangled in its current state, will be the largest project ever undertaken by the New Jersey Department of Transportation so far.

But how did it come to this?

According to the NJDOT spokesman Joe Dee, the problems with the interchange began with the assumptions that went into constructing it, back in the 1950s.

"It was originally built primarily to improve access to Philadelphia, to the Walt Whitman and Ben Franklin bridges along I-76," said Dee, looking through the transportation department's records. "It was made as a feeder onto Route 42 and I-76, and at the time, there wasn't much through traffic."

Essentially, the assumption was that anyone driving along I-295 toward Route 42 and I-76 would exit onto those highways toward Philadelphia, rather than continuing on I-295.

And, according to Dee, that assumption was largely correct in the 1950s, when the interchange was grafted onto the already-existing Route 42 as part of the Interstate Highways System.

"But, fast-forward 60 years, the corridor ramps built onto that interchange at the time don't handle the traffic that exists now," he said. "It runs parallel to the Turnpike, it's now used as an alternative to the Turnpike by many drivers, and there's been a build-up in traffic on 76 and 42 as well."

Today, approximately 250,000 vehicles pass through the four points of the interchange every day, according to NJDOT statistics.

The vehicle crash rate at the intersection is seven times the state average.

NJDOT records show officials discussing a need to address traffic concerns at the interchange as far back as the 1980s. However, this latest push to finally move the long-debated project forward began with an initial "partnering" meeting in late 2002, where participants discussed the requirements of getting such a plan approved.

By December 2008, the final environmental impact study was completed, and a total of 26 interchange plans had been considered, according to Dee.

"This went on for years before work began on this project," he said. "It's mentioned in documents in the '80s, but the delays could've been due to getting the necessary funding together, or because the area has heavy development.

"But now, we have an opportunity to make some operational improvements."

The 295/42/76 project, called "Direct Connection" and set to finish in 2021, will see the construction of an I-295 overpass over Route 42 and I-76, making it possible for 295 to continue through the area unbroken.

At present, the I-295, I-76 and Route 42 interchange does not provide a direct connection for I-295 through traffic. The existing situation requires motorists to reduce speed in both directions of I-295 to safely negotiate ramps with 35 mph speed limits, while at the same time competing with drivers entering from Route 42 and I-76.

The project is split into four contracts, one of which has already been awarded to PKF Mark III Inc., based in Roselle. PKF had submitted the low bid of approximately \$160 million for their part of the project.

A separate project, set to begin in 2016 and called "Missing Moves," will aim to solve another long-time gripe of area motorists — the inability to drive directly from 42 South to 295 North, or to 42 North from 295 South.

However, it's the Direct Connection project that will be the major effort for NJDOT, costing a projected \$800 million, plus another \$100 million in utility, engineering and other costs.

It will not be the largest project in NJDOT history for long, though.

The [Pulaski Skyway renovation](#), which will see the overhaul of the three-and-a-half mile bridge crossing two rivers and connecting Newark and Jersey City, is expected to cost close to \$1 billion.

"That's going to be the biggest, when that happens," said Dee. "But these two are the largest undertakings we've ever had."

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