

## State aims to cure accident-plagued South Jersey interchange

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The I-295/I-76/Route 42 interchange has been a problem for the better part of three decades, resulting in crash rates as high as seven times the national average. / DENISE HENHOEFFER/Courier-Post

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**GLOUCESTER CITY** — Anyone who has driven the gantlet known as the I-295/I-76/Route 42 interchange can attest to the harrowing experience.

The interchange area has been a problem for the better part of three decades, confounding drivers and resulting in crash rates as high as seven times the national average.

Crashes on the three roads in 2009 -- the latest data provided from the New Jersey Department of Transportation -- totaled more than 400, and a quarter of those resulted in injuries. The last fatality from a crash in the area occurred last June on Route 42.

Motorists have even hit the Internet to blog their rants and rages, sharing their stories of horror while trying to navigate tight merges, dodge weaving traffic and avoid speeding tractor-trailers. One blogger wrote: "That interchange is absolute hell."

The DOT recognized the problem as far back as the mid-1980s. And while there is a planned construction project in the works to alleviate the bottlenecks, drivers are several years away from getting any relief.

According to the DOT, "The I-295, I-76 and Route 42 interchange does not provide a

distinct and separate direct connection for I-295 through traffic.

"The existing configuration of the interchange requires motorists to reduce speed in both the northbound and southbound directions of I-295 so that they can safely negotiate the ramps with 35 mph speed limits."

The DOT also notes drivers traveling through the interchange on 295 must also contend with vehicles entering from 42 and 76, "necessitating dangerous weaving movements."

The three area roadways -- surrounded by Gloucester City and the boroughs of Mount Ephraim and Bellmawr -- are major carriers of Philadelphia commuter traffic from the Walt Whitman Bridge as well as connectors to the Jersey Shore. That makes the interchange the busiest in the region.

In 1985, as the Route 42 widening project took place, the DOT said it became apparent additional improvements to the region would be needed. Fourteen years later, a Transportation Investment Study (TIS) -- which included a Congestion Management Study -- was prepared by the DOT in conjunction with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

The studies identified "operational deficiencies" in the interchange's configuration that "can be viewed as a possible contributing cause to the high incidence of accidents.

"In addition," the studies noted, "congestion within the interchange exacerbates congestion on surrounding arterials -- as motorists seek alternative routes."

The back-ups from congestion and accidents on the interchange cause added traffic on neighboring surface roads as drivers sought to get around the problem.

Mount Ephraim Police Capt. Brian Beppel says the interchange continuously impacts borough roads.

"If there's an accident and they shut down a lane, the people trying to get off 295 increases the volume of traffic on our roads," Beppel says. "Consequently, we see more accidents on our surface roads. Also, people take chances or are lost, so there are a lot more traffic violations that take place."

As the millennium dawned, congestion and accident rates continued to mount in the interchange. And the DOT conducted more reviews, analyses and studies.

Finally, in 2006, the department produced a "Project Purpose and Need" document that identified potential strategies to "improve traffic safety and reduce traffic congestion at the interchange."

And in March, 2009, a "Record of Decision" announced that the DOT, in conjunction with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), had selected a preferred "alternative" for the formally named "I-295-I-76/Route 42 Direct Connection Project."

Several "alternatives" were proposed and examined to determine the ability of each to meet the purpose and need of the proposed project. One was called the "No-Build Alternative" -- meaning do nothing.

## The plan

The 2009 decision revealed the DOT and the FHWA had selected "Alternative D" as the approved plan.

Alternative D calls for the mainline I-295 to be accommodated with a direct connection and a 55 mph posted speed. Northbound and southbound 295 would be side by side, crossing over Ramp D (the move from I-76 southbound to I-295 northbound), Route 42/I-76 and Browning Road.

Interchange ramps would have a 40 mph speed limit and consist of two lanes except for Ramp F (used for southbound I-76 traffic heading to I-295 southbound.) Parts of 295 will be elevated and built up to cross over parts of the New St. Mary's Cemetery and the Bellmawr Park baseball field.

A 295 northbound third-level viaduct will also be constructed over Browning Road, with a similar third level crossing over Route 42/I-76. Express/local lanes on I-76 westbound will be removed.

The plan also calls for the elimination of Al-Jo's curve -- the section of I-295 southbound in Bellmawr where speed is reduced to 35 mph to negotiate a ramp that connects I-295 south and Route 42 east.

The Direct Connection project includes four individual construction contracts. The first and second contracts are in the final design stage, says the DOT, with completion of final design and beginning of construction scheduled for the spring of next year.

Completion of the first two phases are scheduled for 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Contract three construction focuses on completing the I-295 mainline direct connection, with work beginning in the winter of 2014 and finishing in the summer of 2015.

The last contract includes the completion of work along I-76/Route 42, with construction starting in the fall of 2014 and ending in the spring of 2017.

Mount Ephraim Fire Chief Brian Gilmore says he hopes the completed project will lessen the traffic congestion and number of accidents.

"The DOT has been very informative and has kept the borough up to date about the project," he said. "What they've proposed is very complex and (the completion date) seems like a long time. But I think it will be well worth the wait."

A 2008 study by the department estimated the project's cost at \$902 million in year of expenditure dollars."

DOT spokeswoman Fran McCrory says that is still the total estimated cost of the I-295 Direct Connection project, with construction completion in 2017 and all construction funding provided from 2012 through 2017.

Funding is being provided by the Federal Highway Administration.

The impact

A project as large as the Direct Connection venture is bound to have just as large an impact on surrounding neighborhoods and residents. The DOT says crews will take practicable measures to "avoid, minimize, and mitigate potential impacts" to the surrounding environment, but disruptions will occur.

Throughout the construction project, the DOT says, traffic conditions are not expected to be significantly affected, since the same number of existing traveled lanes will be maintained during peak travel hours. Most of the construction will take place at night, and the DOT says it will conduct outreach programs to notify the public of proposed construction activities and associated traffic patterns and delays.

The DOT's McCrory says there are 14 residential dwellings and one business being affected by the proposed project.

"Twelve of the residential impacts are within the Bellmawr Park Mutual Housing Corporation development," he said. "All residents of the dwellings being impacted will be relocated."

Eric Hoban, a resident of Bellmawr Park and a trustee of the Mutual Housing Corp., says the approximately 25 people affected "were mad at first."

"But now we're pointing to them that they're getting new homes and it's been so long (since they were notified of the plans) that they're accepting it at this point."

But Hoban says there are other concerns.

"The baseball field behind the (Bellmawr Park Elementary) school will be taken, as will part of the little league ballfield," he lamented. "And our park will be gone."

"And once construction starts, there will be a lot more traffic. We already have a problem with tractor-trailers being diverted off the highways onto our roads. It's going to be crazy."

McCrory says new housing units will be constructed within areas of the same housing development as the residences being affected.

"Relocations are anticipated to be completed by fall 2013, after which time the vacated units will be demolished," he said. "All relocation costs will be borne from the project budget.

"The department has received no complaints to date with regards to the needed relocations."

Another construction issue is the planned encroachment on the New St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery on Browning Road, just east of the 295/76 overpass. McCrory says about 6.2 acres of unoccupied cemetery land is being affected, as well as an office building.

"The proposed noise wall for the highway will come within approximately 20 feet of one of the existing mausoleums," McCrory said.

Camden Diocese spokesman Peter Feuerherd says the state had offered the diocese \$1.8 million for the portion of property.

"We asked for \$6 million because it is likely that once the project gets going we will have to move crypts as families make requests for quieter resting places (for their deceased loved ones)," says Feuerherd.

The state then invoked eminent domain, Feuerherd says.

"We are contesting that," he added. "We went to court and have asked that the case be dismissed because the state has not handed over the necessary documents."

McCrory says that "eminent domain process will be used if an agreement cannot be reached with the property owners." Another court date has yet to be set, said Feuerherd.

Mark Musumeci, who was raised in Cherry Hill, has grandparents and an uncle buried in the cemetery. He's not happy with the possible effect on his relatives' resting place, a crypt at the back of the cemetery near 295.

"It's disheartening," he said. "I got really upset when I heard (about the project.)"

"My father is supposed to be buried there, but now he doesn't want to. I don't know what we'll do."

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