

## Methuen rotary to be eliminated

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August 30, 2009 01:24 am

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METHUEN, Mass. — State officials are planning to make the dreaded rotary at the confluence of Interstate 93 and routes 110 and 113 a thing of the past.

"This has been a long time coming," said Dennis DiZoglio, executive director of the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission.

The Methuen Rotary project will cost an estimated \$110 million, said state Sen. Steven Baddour, D-Methuen, making it one of the most expensive road projects in the history of the Merrimack Valley. Construction is expected to get underway in five years.

"It's a complete elimination of the rotary," said Baddour, chairman of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation.

The rotary frustrates drivers because it causes traffic congestion — even backing up onto I-93 at peak times — and it's been the site of so many accidents that Methuen police had to give it an address, 400 Lowell St.

The rotary, Exit 46 on I-93, is used by drivers heading to Methuen, Lawrence, Dracut and Lowell, so fixing the mess there has implications for the entire region.

"It's not just a Methuen project," Baddour said.

Drivers merging into the two-lane rotary have to cross paths with drivers trying to leave, and vice versa. The accident rate there is four and a half times the state average, with more than 200 crashes per year, officials said.

"One hundred thousand people use 93 every day in that location," DiZoglio said.

Officials from MassHighway are working on plans to replace the rotary with a safer, more user-friendly configuration.

The rotary now has one ramp coming off I-93 north. MassHighway's preferred plan calls for that off-ramp to be replaced by two new off-ramps — one for traffic heading to routes 110 and 113 east and one for traffic heading to routes 110 and 113 west. There would also be two on-ramps for people heading south on I-93 — one for people coming from the west and one for people coming from the east. There's only one on-ramp now.

People coming off I-93 south would continue to use one ramp. There are fewer motorists who pass through the area who come from north of exit 46, officials said.

There are now two bridges that carry the highway over the rotary, and officials plan to dismantle both and build one new bridge to allow six lanes of traffic to pass underneath.

Crews also propose to install five traffic lights on the roads leading into the area — three to the west and two to the east. One of the lights — at Riverside Drive, Bolduc Street and Lowell Street — will be installed next spring.

The whole project is still in the planning phases, and major construction isn't supposed to begin until 2014. Officials are now going through environmental studies, doing things like surveying the land and studying noise and air quality. Workers are slated to begin the final design in late 2011. The project will go out to bid in April 2014, and there are public hearings scheduled for this January and for January 2012, according to information provided by MassHighway.

Construction was originally slated to begin in 2023, but thanks to state reforms that allow transportation projects to be expedited, construction is now supposed to begin nine years sooner, Baddour said.

"I'm going to keep the pressure on MassHighway to shave even more years off the project," Baddour said.

Officials had planned to build a temporary ramp off the highway in the interim, but the ramp would have gone close to Noyes Street residents' homes, so the idea was dropped.

The rotary has been a subject of frustration for years. Officials have held more than 100 meetings with area residents to discuss plans to fix it, and some people have had their doubts that anything would ever be done.

"It's going to be done, there's no doubt about it," State Rep. Linda Dean Campbell, D-Methuen, said.

It's too soon to tell how long the actual construction will last, Baddour said.

The federal government will pick up 80 percent of the tab, and the state will fund the remaining 20 percent, officials said.

The new setup will be designed to hold traffic for the predicted standards of the year 2030. The current setup was built in the 1950s, when traffic was obviously lighter in the region.

"It's a 1950s rotary working in 2009," Baddour said.

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