



State sees progress on Methuen rotary fix

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Updated: 08/19/2009 06:40:51 AM EDT

BOSTON -- Anyone from Dracut and Lowell who commutes every day on Interstate 93 knows that just reaching the highway can be a headache.

Traffic at the Methuen rotary backs up in the morning on routes 110 and 113, and bottlenecks back onto the highway in the evening. Paving work along Route 113 this summer has not made commuting any easier.

But officials who have been working for more than six years to find a solution to the traffic nightmare say the finish line is coming into focus.

"It's no longer a project that people are talking about, it's beyond conversation," said Sen. Steven Baddour, a Methuen Democrat and chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee. "This project is now a reality."

The preferred plan arrived in May after MassHighway studies called for eliminating the rotary. Routes 110 and 113 will be widened and realigned to carry traffic under I-93, and two new ramps will be added to create a half-clover that doubles the capacity of vehicles entering the highway southbound and eases congestion exiting at night on the northbound side.

Baddour said MassHighway has laid out an aggressive construction schedule. Work is not scheduled to begin until late 2014, but some short-term improvements could be made as soon as next year.

"This is going to happen," Baddour said, "and between this project and the I-93 interchange (in Tewksbury and Andover), you're talking about \$300 million in infrastructure improvements. That is huge for the region."

Highway officials say the design will not only reduce congestion, but improve safety and limit the environmental impact from cars and trucks stuck idling in traffic.

Three of the four approaches to the Methuen rotary at exit 46 currently fail to meet traffic demand during peak hours, according to state data.

Certain spots within the rotary have crash rates 4.5 times the statewide average.

As the design process continues, the strategy calls for installing a new traffic signal and sidewalks at the Route 110 and Riverside Drive intersection near the Dunkin' Donuts.

The state also plans to widen the northbound off-ramp to include a bypass lane separated from traffic entering the rotary by concrete barriers that would carry nonrotary traffic headed toward Methuen past Heather Drive.

MassHighway officials say they hope to advertise both projects for construction -- costing \$1.2 million -- later this year or early next year.

The timeline for the remainder of the \$110 million project calls for the environmental review and preliminary design to be completed by January 2012, with final design finished by April 2014. Construction on the new highway interchange, estimated to cost \$44 million, would begin later that year and take three years to complete.

Baddour said early estimates on the timing of this

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construction project did not predict shovels in the ground until at least 2019, but steps taken by the state to streamline the design-and-review process knocked five years off the process.

Road shoulders and sidewalks will also be added to the area to make the interchange more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly.

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