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Early 2013 work start eyed for Exit 46 rotary

By Bill Kirk

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METHUEN — Less than 100 yards from Jackson's Restaurant on Route 110, cars and trucks jockeyed for position at the enormous rotary and Interstate 93 interchange, horns honking, brakes screeching and fingers wagging.

Inside the quiet restaurant, Richard Davey, secretary of the state Department of Transportation, told a breakfast gathering of the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce that by the start of next year, construction would begin on a \$60 million overhaul of the rotary, aimed at making it safer and more navigable by area drivers.

"We're in the final design phase," said Davey, speaking to about 50 people during the event, sponsored by TEC Engineering of Lawrence. "If we get it to bid by the end of the year, we'll be in the construction phase next year."

It was welcome news for many in the audience, who have watched and waited for years for the project to get underway.

Plans for the rotary to be replaced with a "partial cloverleaf-type" interchange, along with a number of new traffic signals and access ramps, have been talked about since 2001. The rotary is located at Exit 46 on I-93 and is used by drivers heading to Methuen, Lawrence, Dracut and Lowell. From 2007 to 2009, 650 accidents were recorded in or near the rotary — or more than double the amount of crashes in any other location in the area.

"It is a critical transportation need and it's long overdue," said Methuen Community Development Director William Buckley. "Allowing people to get through there safely and efficiently is important."

In addition, the project will enhance economic development of the area, he said.

"This will open up access to both sides of the Route 110 development corridor," he said. "There are key development parcels, west of the rotary, that will become more attractive once the rotary is gone."

For years, he said, the rotary has blocked economic development in the area.

Buckley, on the job since January, was the community development director in Methuen from 1999 to 2002, before he took a job with a real estate development company in Salisbury. He said he remembers in 2002 when a huge project was proposed on the west side of the rotary that would have created "hundreds of thousands of square feet" of office space.

The plan was scrapped after traffic studies showed that the Route 110 rotary couldn't handle the load of traffic from the new development.

"Mayor (Stephen) Zanni has instructed me to become very active, identifying where there are additional economic development opportunities along that corridor," he said. "It's going to open up opportunities. It's a key commercial corridor, from Lawrence along 110 to the rotary, and improved traffic flow will only enhance business opportunities there. We really see it as a boon for the region."

The \$60 million project is being paid for with mostly federal money, with \$55 million funneled through the state and

another \$5 million through the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC), according to Anthony Komornick, a transportation program manager with the MVPC.

"It's been a long haul," said Komornick, noting that the need for the project was first mentioned in a 2001 I-93 corridor study conducted by the MVPC. Following years of review and committee meetings, a final project was approved that included eradicating the rotary and building a single road under 93 that would carry traffic east and west.

Meanwhile, a half-clover leaf would bring traffic off I-93 north and south onto Route 110. The plan also calls for sound barriers and other improvements to the area.

Also yesterday, Davey spoke about several other transportation issues:

The debate over fare hikes and service cutbacks has subsided, at least until next year. Davey said the MBTA faces a \$100 million deficit next year. He told business leaders at yesterday's breakfast that the Legislature needs to consider a gas tax as one solution to the funding crisis.

"The current system we have we can't afford," he said. "What we want we really can't afford."

Double-tracking along the Haverhill line is continuing, and once complete will reduce conflicts with freight trains and improve service to that city.

In response to a question about chronic project delays, Davey said one of the culprits is always utility companies that need to move poles, lines, pipes or other infrastructure as road improvements are made. He said that the state's bridge repair program reimburses utility companies 80 percent of their cost for moving utilities.

Road projects have no such reimbursement program, Davey said, but he is pushing for one.

"It gives them an incentive to work participate with us," he said, adding that most federal road projects do reimburse utilities for any work they have to do to move their wires or other infrastructure.

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