

Are traffic roundabouts in Gallup's future?

Written by By Mike Daly Guest Columnist
Friday, 11 June 2021 06:00



According to traffic statistics, Gallup has an extremely high rate of car/truck crashes. The New Mexico Department of Transportation looked at all of the crashes in the Gallup area — driving, walking, biking, etc. The area around the Interstate 40/U.S. 491 interchange emerges as a top priority. According to an accompanying report, the interchange area has almost 15 percent of the crashes that occur in the Gallup area “making the facility unsafe and unreliable.”

The report indicates that a crash occurs approximately every three days in the interchange area. Over the last five years there have been over 200 rear-end, 121 side-swipe and 97 head-on accidents.

Remember that this interchange was designed long before the Walmart & Home Depot came along and increased traffic on Maloney Avenue. The three-lane, west-bound exit ramp off I-40 was upgraded to deal with the additional traffic and it has for the moment. Unfortunately, with so many vehicles traveling north and south on U.S. 491 and with the traffic signals so close, traffic is often jammed up. A big problem is that the westbound I-40 ramps and the Maloney Avenue intersection are only 435 feet apart.

The NMDOT report indicates that future growth including the development of the Gallup Energy Logistics Park and a realigned/reconstructed Allison Road interchange will also affect the I-40/U.S. 491 area. An additional issue is that the five signals on U.S. 491 in the immediate area, do not have an interconnection to run them as a system.

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New Mexico Department of Transportation and Wilson & Company Engineers, gave an online presentation on the proposed Interchange Safety Improvement alternatives being considered for the I-40/U.S.-491 interchange area on April 28. This was the first of several planned public input presentations.

In their presentation they mentioned that several big ticket items are off the table because there is no room for them, and they would close off some business access. So the current plans all respect existing business operations. No private property Right of Way takes are planned with any of the proposed alternatives.

Several alternatives are being considered by the NMDOT and these are the ideas for which they are seeking citizen input.

The first option is a signal system upgrade aimed at reducing delays along U.S. 491.

A second alternative is to move the westbound I-40 exit ramp over to Maloney Avenue. This option includes a loop ramp for the westbound entrance ramp. This option would require that Maloney Avenue is a one-way system going west from 10th street to U.S. 491.

The third alternative introduces a single roundabout and eliminates the traffic signal at the I-40 westbound ramp intersection. It introduces a westbound exit slip ramp which would extend under the existing I-40 bridge and over to the new roundabout. This option allows Maloney to remain as a two-way street.

The fourth alternative is the most interesting in that it adds two roundabouts, one on each side of the U.S. 491 intersection at Maloney. This alternative eliminates the need for both U.S. 491 signals located at the I-40 westbound ramp and at Maloney Avenue. Doing so eliminates all of the U.S. 491 left-turning movements at the interchange north of the I-40 overpass. The roundabouts for this alternative will be designed to accommodate large tractor-trailer trucks.

All the planned roundabouts are to be one lane if constructed. A fifth alternative is what NMDOT calls an "additive alternative." Currently southbound traffic on U.S. 491 has two continuous

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lanes and a third right-hand lane that leads to I-40 eastbound. This alternative extends the third right-hand lane south past the entrance/loop ramp to make this a true three lane-section.

The third lane would then merge back into a two-lane road before the bridge over the railroad tracks.

Expected results: The study indicates that alternatives two and three will mitigate 20 percent of the accidents at the two intersections, while alternative four will mitigate 100 percent of the accidents. Of course any alternative with roundabouts will require a bit of a learning curve for Gallup drivers. Several months of confusion are likely, but, in the end, if alternative four is chosen, things at the interchange area are sure to speed up by removing the signals at the two intersections.

BABY ELEPHANT BELIEFS

It is said that in India when training a baby elephant, it is chained to a tree to keep it in place. And the baby elephant learns not to attempt to move. Later when the elephant grows large enough to pull a locomotive the same elephant is kept in place with a rope tied to a stake.

Such is the strength of early learning.

In my case, my father was caught in a traffic circle (alias roundabout) driving around in Long Beach in the fog for an extended period. From the time I was six years old every time a traffic circle alias roundabout, was mentioned, my father's outburst contained language that would not do in proper company. I have held onto this categorical dislike of my father's. For those who travel the reservation, you will know of the roundabout west of Ganado, Ariz. at the Burnside intersection where U.S. 191 heads north to Chinle.

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As it was being built, I started trash-talking this abomination.

Unfortunately, my experience using it did not agree with my earlier opinion and I had to grudgingly admit it was a good idea. Similarly, when heading out of Albuquerque to miss the heavy I-40 westbound traffic I used Menaul and found the roundabout at 12th Street very easy to navigate. But not so much the two-lane roundabouts at the I-40 interchange at Acoma/Sky City. I was caught attempting to use the inside lane alongside a large tractor-trailer truck and found myself up on the curb to keep from getting sideswiped.

So, I'm past my baby elephant belief, but am really happy that NMDOT and Wilson & Co. are planning one-lane roundabouts for Gallup.

For those wishing to get further information or to make comments of their own, NMDOT has published the Public Meeting Presentation and the Phase IA/B Report on their District 6 website link: <https://dot.state.nm.us/content/nmdot/en/ProjectsD6.html#6101390>

NMDOT is also planning to present this same information to the Gallup City Council at their June 22 meeting. There will also be a second public information input session in the middle of July, where the presentation will give the NMDOT/design team's preferred alternatives that will move the project forward into design development.

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