

I-40 study shows motorists want wider roads, shoulders

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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With all the transportation studies going on these days, it seems like all roads lead to – or at least through – Gallup.

Most recently, the New Mexico Department of Transportation held a hearing for the I-40 Corridor Study, which is studying traffic on Interstate 40 from the Arizona state line to Albuquerque. Consultant Parametrix has done traffic and accident studies and held two public hearings so far, and is continuing to solicit comments about how to make i-40 a smoother ride.

A top goal is to make traveling I-40 safer. Crashes on the stretch of highway in the study peaked in 2019 at 672, then decreased to 645 in 2020 and 600 in 2021. About 18 crashes a year involve fatalities.

One thing the public comments have made clear so far is that motorists want more lanes and wider shoulders. The most common complaints have to do with traffic slowdowns because of construction and accidents. In fact, the top three concerns among commenters were traffic backups (91%), lane closures from accidents (82%) and lane closures due to construction (78%). Getting around those situations would go a long way toward providing relief.

“People are really concerned about safety in this corridor and overall reliability,” NMDOT Project Manager Summer Herrera told the audience at an April 25 public hearing. “People are frustrated with those closures and with trucks taking up both lanes.”

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Like other communities, the traffic is heavier during traditional commuting hours. For now, two lanes in each direction seems to be enough. But as the community grows, more lanes may be needed.

Traffic planners are also concerned about “geometric deficiencies” – ramps or curves that aren’t optimal for motorists to navigate – and deteriorating or obsolete infrastructure, such as 32 bridges that don’t have enough horizontal or vertical clearance.

Those deficiencies become a problem, especially when backups on I-40 push motorists off to parallel or frontage roads that may run through smaller communities. About 120 miles of Historic Highway 66 parallels I-40 between Arizona and Albuquerque.

“It can be hard to figure out how to get on and off of alternate routes,” Parametrix Deputy Project Manager Stephanie Miller said. “They are not highways. Speeds are quite a bit [lower]. They are not designed to accommodate the interstate traffic.”

Parametrix traffic lead Charles Allen said that the I-40 study will help NMDOT prioritize what needs to be repaired or improved.

“This is not something that will be built in a year or two years,” Allen said. “We will look at the condition of the roadway and the safety of it and work on the biggest need.”

The current comment period for the I-40 study runs through May 24. The public may comment via the project website (<https://i40nmstudy.com>), by email to I40study@parametrix.com or by postal mail to I-40 Corridor Study, 9600 San Mateo Blvd. NE, Albuquerque, NM 97113.

NMDOT also had a hearing in March for the Route 66 Improved project, which covers roughly the same length of Historic Highway 66, and the city has consultants working on a Transportation Master Plan to address traffic planning as the city grows.

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It's not as confusing as it sounds: each of the studies looks at roads under a different jurisdiction. I-40 is federal, Highway 66 is state and the city study looks at all of the streets under city control within city limits.

Although the agencies didn't coordinate on the timing of their studies, they are expected to reference each other when all the studies are completed. All three studies are set to include public hearings again in the fall.

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