

Business group says half done is well begun

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What highway project won top honors from a regional business group for improving mobility in the Triangle?

If you guessed the exasperating, months-behind-schedule widening of Interstate 40 in Durham County, you would be half right.

It's only half finished -- the westbound half -- and commuters see I-40 as a peculiar mix of half slow and half fast. That's good enough for the Regional Transportation Alliance, which has a glass-is-half-full philosophy.

Eastbound drivers will be coping until sometime next year with two-lane cattle chutes, ramps opening and closing, and traffic sometimes squeezed into one lane for nighttime construction.

But when they're zooming west, I-40 is another story. All three lanes are open to traffic. There are a few rough patches here and there, but for the most part, westbound I-40 is fast and smooth.

"It has provided more highway capacity for that route, a reduction in peak-hour delays, and better access to The Streets at Southpoint and other development points in and around that area in southern Durham County," says Joe Milazzo II, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance.

So the group of Triangle businesses and chambers of commerce recently voted the I-40 westbound widening its large transportation project of the year.

The state had planned to finish the entire 10.6-mile job in December 2003. It now appears on track for completion in spring or summer 2005.

But it won't be terribly long before six lanes are as badly clogged as four lanes were a few years ago. Average traffic counts on I-40 around Southpoint increased from 78,000 cars a day in 1999 to 93,000 in 2003. Between Davis Drive and Miami Boulevard, the daily count rose from 126,000 cars to 140,000.

There's talk of adding a "high occupancy vehicle" lane to I-40, reserved for buses and carpools. But that would be years and millions of dollars in the future.

Meanwhile, Milazzo says, a possible candidate for recognition next year will be the widening of I-40's eastbound half.

Rules of the road

Jim Kimbrough of Durham has seen two different kinds of no-right-turn-on-red signs at various intersections, and he wonders whether both have the same legal power. Most of these signs have a red dot in the middle, but he has seen one that uses only words.

"So is it enforceable, or just a suggestion?" Kimbrough asks of the text-only sign. "It seems weird to me. You would think they would be uniform."

Obey the sign, says First Sgt. Everett Clendenin, a Highway Patrol spokesman. That's more than just his suggestion. The law doesn't specify that such signs must be identical to be enforceable.

Kimbrough has a tougher question about turn signals and exit lanes at an especially tricky spot on I-40. Where the eastbound interstate splits just west of Raleigh, the two left lanes continue as I-40, and the two right lanes turn into the Wade Avenue exit.

If you're driving in the left lane of those two exit lanes, he wonders, should you use your right signal to indicate that you're taking the exit? Or would that make other drivers think you're about to change lanes?

That's no idle question at this spot on I-40. There are always drivers who miss the mile-long succession of information signs and realize at the last minute that they should have changed lanes. Hence the dramatic skid marks.

"You never know where anybody is going," Kimbrough says. "If they have their turn signal on, are they changing lanes or not?"

Clendenin recognizes the problem. Even if you'll be staying in your lane, he says, a turn signal indicates that you're taking the exit. "To be safe, I would still do it because you're turning off the main travel portion of the highway," Clendenin says.