

North Tri-State toll work to put squeeze on drivers

Restart of widening project to narrow lanes, add drive time

By Robert Channick
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Construction on the North Tri-State Tollway will begin ramping up again next month, promising long commutes and short tempers from O'Hare International Airport to the Wisconsin state line.

Entering the second season of a three-year, \$1.5 billion project, nearly 40 miles are being widened to four lanes in each direction, affecting some 25 bridges, dozens of adjacent communities and 170,000 daily motorists.

"There are going to be some pains along the way," said Rocco Zuccherro, deputy chief of planning for the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority. "Trying to get a couple hundred thousand people going throughout this corridor on a daily basis, we understand it's going to affect a lot of people."

While the largest contiguous project in the tollway's 12-year, \$6.3 billion congestion relief program made some progress last year -- the Willow Road and Illinois Highway 120 bridges are among those scheduled for completion in June -- the road ahead is expected to be much bumpier.

Addressing about two dozen residents and local officials at a meeting Tuesday at the Northbrook Public Library, Zuccherro presented a map filled with bridge work, compressed traffic and virtually no relief until December. The northbound lanes will be under construction from Gurnee to Wisconsin, with work switching to the southbound lanes from Illinois Highway 132 (Grand Avenue) to Balmoral Avenue near O'Hare.

In an effort to keep three lanes open in each direction during peak hours, traffic will be squeezed onto the shoulders, with one lane crossing the median to join opposing traffic. The southbound crossover lane will run between the Waukegan Toll Plaza and Half Day Road (Illinois Highway 22), and again between Lake Cook Road and Balmoral.

Trucks will not be allowed in the crossover lane, and officials warn that the lane on the "wrong" side of the median will be a de facto express lane for long stretches. The limited southbound access points include Stearns School Road near Gurnee, Illinois Highway 137 (Buckley Road), Illinois Highway 60, Lake Cook Road and O'Hare.

Lane closings are to begin in February. To accommodate the crossover traffic, the speed limit will be reduced to 45 m.p.h. throughout the construction zone.

"These are very tricky maneuvers and people have to pay attention driving through them," Zuccherro said.

Complicating matters, tollway bridge rebuilding will be ubiquitous in 2008. Work will start this month at the Lake Cook Road overpass. Those on Illinois 22, O'Plaine Road and Illinois 132 are set to start

later in the year. Bridges on Ballard Road, Golf Road, Central Road, Lake Avenue and Illinois 60 are among others also being rebuilt.

With traffic of about 40,000 vehicles a day, a potential congestion nightmare looms on Milwaukee Avenue, which runs under the Tri-State in Glenview. This spring, the tollway will begin a two-year bridge replacement there, while less than a mile to the southeast on Milwaukee, the Illinois Department of Transportation will redeck a deteriorating bridge over the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad.

IDOT officials said the timing of the Milwaukee Avenue bridge project was unintentional but unavoidable; the bridge was in poor enough shape that the department had to ban trucks and force them to detour around it, spokeswoman Catherine Kibble said Wednesday.

"That's a burden for deliveries and all kinds of things, so we don't like to delay those projects," Kibble said. "The funds were available, so we're moving forward with the redecking of the bridge, even though there is other work in the area."

In the summer, IDOT will also begin work to the northwest on Milwaukee from Willow to Sanders Roads, including the bridge over the Des Plaines River, heightening concerns for nearby residents who attended Tuesday's meeting.

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Business park offers shortcut

While the rebuilding of Illinois Highway 60 over the Tri-State Tollway will make it a long year for many commuters, a Lake Forest business park just east of the overpass has engineered a unique solution: its own tollway access road, complete with I-PASS.

Built this fall for under \$3 million, the temporary road links Conway Park -- a bucolic corporate enclave housing the Chicago Bears training facility -- to the adjacent Lake Forest Oasis and the northbound tollway. Opened Jan. 17 at the northern end of Field Drive, the road provides 5,800 employees and others in the know an end-run around the construction bottleneck.

The bypass is set to remain open for 18 months, or until bridge work is complete. Tollway officials agreed to the project after they were granted an easement by the business park owners to expand truck parking at the oasis.

"We've never done this before," said Rocco Zuccherro, deputy chief of planning for the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority. "We're going to see how it works."

With the news spread by word-of-mouth, nearly 600 vehicles used the access road within three hours of its opening, according to Larry Meilbeck, president of the Conway Park Owners' Association, who was the first driver through.

There are no signs on Illinois 60 promoting the shortcut. "It is a public road. It is open to anyone and this access road that we put in can handle that burden," Meilbeck said. "It would become problematic if that became the means of access to the northbound tollway."

-- Robert Channick