

# Tri-State tear-ups to start today, starting inescapable web of delays

By Mick Zawislak | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 3/10/2008 12:08 AM

Crowds are expected to pour in this season to enjoy the new Dark Knight and other roller coasters at Six Flags Great America. What won't be any fun is getting out of the Gurnee amusement park.

The regional attraction is taking unprecedented steps, including hiring extra staff, to help an estimated 3 million visitors navigate a pending traffic mess.

"That really can ruin somebody's visit to the park, when it's out of our control," said Brooke Gabbert, public relations manager.

Up and down the Tri-State Tollway from O'Hare International Airport north, businesses, travelers and commuters will be caught in a seemingly inescapable web of construction in this second year of the three-year project.

Preparations have been ongoing for months and the backbone work to add a fourth southbound lane was scheduled to be under way today.

Related work to connect roads and bridges will ripple out as the season progresses, intensifying the effect.

"Everywhere people drive, they're going to turn the corner and there will be construction ahead. It is going to be a difficult situation," said Bill Baltutis, head of the Deerfield-based TMA of Lake-Cook, a consortium of businesses dealing with suburban transportation issues.

Leading the way is the brunt of the \$1.3 billion project to rebuild and widen 40 miles of the tollway to Route 173, and resurface another 5 miles to the Wisconsin border. It is the most expansive project on this stretch since the road opened 50 years ago.

A fourth southbound lane was added last year from Route 173 to Grand Avenue, and the first northbound segment also was completed between Balmoral Avenue and Dempster Street.

Though three tollway lanes in each direction will remain open as the majority of the southbound portion is done this year, access will be limited to some cross streets and speeds will be reduced for tricky traffic shifts.

You've got a recipe for frustration when you couple that with simultaneous projects -- the Edens Expressway resurfacing, bridge repairs on Milwaukee Avenue in Glenview and Wheeling, and work on Lake-Cook Road, Route 60 and Washington Street.

Lane reductions also will occur on local streets as bridges over the tollway are widened. In some cases, local road bridges will have to be lengthened to accommodate a wider tollway below, which also can cause delays.

In all, 58 bridges will be reconstructed by the time the project wraps up in 2010.

"It's necessary, but you have the Main Street of Lake County under construction," Baltutis said. "It might be a good time to enjoy local events because getting across the county on major arterials will be a challenge."

Some commuters, such as those who use Willow Road, have been feeling the pinch of lane closures for a year. Route 60 has been clogged the past few months as that bridge is widened, with others, including Grand Avenue and Half Day Road, to come this summer.

In essence, the eye of the major road construction storm is moving north from the Chicago area and southern Cook County.

"We're paying the price for falling behind on road improvement projects," said Joe Schwieterman, a transportation expert and director of the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University.

"The good news is we're now serious about lane additions."

But the impact on drivers in northern Cook and Lake counties is now more pronounced, whichever direction you're headed.

In the 1970s, about three quarters of all Lake County residents also worked there. That has dropped to about two-thirds while the population increased by about 75,000 since 2000.

Meanwhile, by the late 1990s, Lake County became an importer of labor, with more people commuting into the county than leaving to work elsewhere.

"The irony here is you expand (road) capacity when you're already stressed," said Siim Soot, former director of the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"It's rare when we have an opportunity to expand our highway systems in anticipation of growth."

Those observations aside, it will be motorists who suffer.

Tollway travelers have been aware something was afoot for some time. Related work, such as bridge widenings, has been ongoing at various points for about a year, but the project will be in high gear this year and next.

To illustrate the scope, consider that on a given day, 3,500 full- and part-time professional and construction workers will work on the project, which is divided into 31 construction contracts.

"It's the biggest project in Lake County in my memory," Baltutis said.

Another gut-punch comes April 4, when the Illinois Department of Transportation closes one lane in each direction for the entire 14-mile length of the Edens Expressway, from Lawrence Avenue to Lake-Cook Road, until late summer.

That work must be done now to provide another 10 to 15 years of life. Waiting would cause more damage and create the need for a more extensive fix, according to Mike Claffey, IDOT spokesman.

That's little solace for the 133,000 drivers who use the Edens, which feeds into the Tri-State, each day.

"We seem to create more headaches for motorists than necessary by how we schedule our road projects," Schwieterman said.

He noted the tollway has transformed its image in recent years and is leading the way in modernizing the system.

Through January, the tollway had obligated \$3.6 billion of a \$6.3 billion program that will continue through 2016.

Big projects, such as Open Road Tolling and the 12.5-mile I-355 extension that opened last November, are expected to save time.

When all the projects planned for the tollway system are complete, drivers can expect to save at least 10 minutes each way on any daily commute.

However, getting to that point will require patience.

Tollway officials have held innumerable meetings and planning sessions with other agencies doing road work and communities that will be affected. Projects have been staggered and coordinated to lessen the pain.

Despite that effort, state and county projects expected to be under way at the same time will make it tough to even reach the tollway in some cases, and limit options for alternative routes. With several adjoining projects, Gurnee figures to be especially hard hit.

"It's a good year to have a helicopter," quipped David Ziegler, Gurnee's village engineer.

The tollway in Gurnee is flanked by destination-type businesses such as Six Flags and Gurnee Mills.

Beginning in July, the eastbound Grand Avenue exit from the tollway will close. Drivers will have to exit a half-mile south at Milwaukee Avenue.

Big projects on Washington Street and the intersection of Route 132/41 will begin later this summer.

"Those are three pretty sizable impacts to our residents. We're coordinating as best as we can, but it's going to be one of those situations where everyone will have to take a deep breath and endure it."

Further north, the southbound exit ramp to Route 41, a possible alternate, already is closed.

Ziegler said he has been working with the "big players in town" to ready for the onslaught.

So are there any alternatives? Observers say being informed about road conditions to avoid trouble is a good first defense. Public transportation, if available, is another possibility. So is van or car pooling.

"There doesn't seem to be any good alternative routes available," Baltutis said. "It kind of reflects that we're trying to catch up with a problem that's been out there for decades."

### **Other snags**

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The Tri-State won't be the only road under construction. Following is a selected list of other projects that will affect travel.

- Washington Street: Reconstruction between routes 21 and 41. Begins this summer after Route 120 bridge work is completed. Tollway bridge over Washington will be widened and raised this year and next.
- Lake-Cook Road: Patching east of the tollway and widening from Pflugsten to Waukegan Road. Late summer.
- Route 21/45 over Des Plaines River: New bridge and road reconstruction from Willow Road to Sanders Road. June.
- Route 21 over Union Pacific railroad south of Lake Avenue. Bridge repair. April.
- Route 41/132 (Grand Avenue): Intersection reconstruction. Remove bridge, replace and modify ramps. Lane closures on both roads although signals will be deactivated. August.
- I-290 at I-90, Route 58 and Woodfield Drive. Two express lanes north and south bound will be closed until July.
- Edens Expressway: Pavement patching. Two lanes closed in each direction at 10 p.m. March 14. One lane each way will re-open by 9 am. March 15. Northbound closures in the vicinity of Elston Avenue, Skokie Boulevard and Willow Road. Southbound closures near Winnetka Road, Willow Road, Devon Avenue and Elston Avenue. Beginning April 4, one lane in each direction from Lawrence Avenue to Lake-Cook Road will be closed until late summer for resurfacing.

Source: Lake County Division of Transportation; Illinois Department of Transportation; TMA Lake-Cook; village of Gurnee.