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NEWS

Danbury could be the only place in CT where you can drive on the I-84 shoulder and not get a ticket

Rob Ryser, Staff Writer
Aug. 21, 2023

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The Connecticut DOT has provided several congestion-reducing solutions to Interstate 84 in Danbury while the larger project of improving the highway continues to be discussed. The DOT plans to change the portion of Newtown Road that goes over I-84 at eastbound Exit 8 and the westbound entrance from one way to two ways with a special criss-cross intersection, which would be the first in the state. Friday, August 18, 2023 Danbury, Conn.

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DANBURY — The next time you're stopped on Interstate 84 trying to go west in the morning or you're backed up trying to get east at the end of the workday take a good look at the wide open left-hand shoulder.

That shoulder may soon be an open travel lane that you can use during rush hour or an accident backup without the risk of getting a ticket, state transportation engineers say.

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"The (state Department of Transportation) is really pushing forward to look at the feasibility and move this specific initiative forward," said Sharat Kalluri, a project manager working on the reengineering of I-84 and the Route 7 interchange in Danbury, speaking during a recent teleconference meeting about the rush hour shoulder lane and two other 'early action' breakout projects that could improve life for Danbury drivers well before the overall I-84 reengineering project breaks ground in the 2040s.

The shoulder lane idea, which is in use in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, is to open or close the "flex lane" based on real-time traffic conditions via electronic signs. How to enforce the new highway lane and keep it debris free remains to be seen.

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"The commuter peak period is where the need is in the morning and the afternoon, but there could be other events...where the lane could be opened or closed," Kalluri said. "The idea is to get traffic onto this shoulder."

In addition to implementing "dynamic lane use" between Lake Avenue and the Route 7 interchange — which would create the first highway stretch of

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"The (dynamic lane use) works within the existing footprint of the highway and does not require any additional right-of-way, so in terms of implementation, this is a pretty quick turnaround," Kalluri said. "The last two projects (near exits 5 and 8) are deemed to be independent utility (meaning) these projects could be done in advance irrespective of whatever happens to the highway because these could be some quick projects that the department could implement at a faster pace."

What does all this mean for Danburians who have been at the mercy of I-84 congestion while the city has grown at one of the fastest rates in the state?

Design work could begin as soon as this year to configure shoulders, to reduce rush hour backups at Main and North streets, and to realign ramps at the Exit 8 interchange with Route 6 and Newtown Road to "put traffic closer to where it wants to go." The projects could be implemented by 2027-2028, Kalluri said.

Concepts to improve I-84 traffic

Work on the larger effort to reduce congestion and improve mobility on the eight-exit stretch of I-84 through Danbury continues. Engineers are looking at a short list of improvement combinations from a list of 26 concepts that have proposed everything from eliminating left-hand ramps to straightening I-84 between exits 2 and 4 by digging a tunnel under University Boulevard.

In the end, the DOT's ability to engineer the right mix of concepts will depend on compromise because, as DOT Project Manager Kevin Burnham said, "It's not easy to do one thing without causing other things to become factors in it."

In contrast, the three early action proposals floated the by DOT during an Aug. 9 virtual meeting are less dependent on other factors and easier to implement.

Veera Karukonda, the city's traffic czar, said the DOT's project team has been working with his office and reviewing his input.

"It's doable changing these operations but the intersection of Main and North is little more complicated because it is going to take more than a minor modification to do it properly — it will be a major project if they want to do it with safety in mind, because there is a major line-of-site issue."

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Karukonda is referring to drivers that get off at Exit 5 onto Main Street and drive south around the curve beneath the underpass, finding it hard to pick up the traffic signal in time. As a result, he said, it's a "primary location for accidents."

The DOT agrees, calling the high-volume intersection "overall a huge concern."

"There's some concepts by the city that were developed (and) we are still in the process of evaluating it," Kalluri said. "We have not really come up with a geometry that would fit for this location (given) there's a limited right-of-way. The intersection is pretty tight."

On the east end at the Exit 8 interchange, the DOT is proposing to shift two ramps to better align them with traffic trends, and to route two-way traffic in an X-shaped direction where Newtown Road currently crosses over the highway in one direction.

The X-shaped design is called a "diverging diamond," which if implemented would make Danbury the first in the state to have it. The state is also considering implementing this type of intersection at the East Norwalk Interstate 95 interchange.

Drivers on the right side of Newtown Road would cross over onto the left side of Newtown Road to take a direct route to I-84 west. Drivers on the left side of Newtown Road would be routed to the right side of Newtown Road to continue south on Newtown Road.

"The big benefit of that diverging diamond is we take away a significant amount of traffic that is turning around, and putting them on this (left) side where they can pretty much go unrestricted onto 84," Kalluri said. "That's a relatively new concept in Connecticut. It's a new thought in Connecticut to do this kind of a layout."

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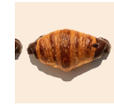

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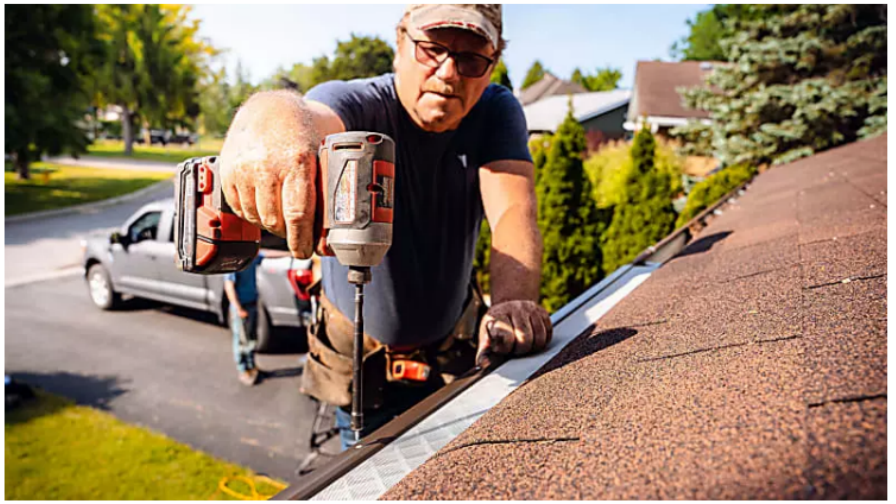

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