

CT's plan to widen Danbury's I-84 keeps options open for traffic fixes at exits 5, 6

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1 of 5

Traffic enters the Interstate 84 Exit 8 loop from Stony Hill Road in Bethel on Friday, Aug. 18, 2023. 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.



DANBURY — The long range plan to bring Interstate 84 into the 21st century with three lanes in both directions from exits 3 through 8 is moving to the next review stage after engineers decided to fix traffic snarls on the west side and the east end with new ramps and new roads.

But what state transportation officials will do about backups at exits 5 and 6 that feed the city's downtown and hospital districts is an open discussion — with three alternatives that engineers plan to keep on the table while the project undergoes environmental review.

“We looked at these three (options) and realized that all three of these serve a different function in the center — we’ve got North Street and Main Street and Tamarack Avenue and Great Plains Road,” said Rick Black, an environmental consultant with the I-84 project, during a meeting earlier this year. “So once we get into the (environmental) analysis we will look in much greater detail at how we can address these different functions in the center.”

Two of the options the state Department of Transportation is considering to improve the center section of I-84 that serves the downtown would create direct access to Danbury Hospital via Tamarack Avenue or Great Plains Road. The third option, which the DOT is keeping open after conversations with Danbury officials, is to build a road parallel to I-84 that would lead to Main Street and North Street, and to build a ramp from North Street onto I-84 westbound.

“We are going to be taking these concepts out to the public for additional feedback and review sometime in the fall or winter, and we plan to issue a final report in early 2024,” said Shannon Burnham, the state DOT’s strategic communications manager, on Friday.

The open discussion about improvements to I-84 between exits 5 and 6 is continuing as the DOT prepares for the next stage of environmental review, which will take years to complete, according to its timeline. The overall project, which is not funded and is expected to cost billions, would not begin construction until the early 2030s. It would not be complete until the mid-2040s.

At stake is the safety and efficiency of an 8-mile section of highway used by at least 85,000 motorists daily, where congestion and lane-changing contribute to one or more interstate accidents each day in Danbury, according to the DOT.

Meanwhile, Danbury continues to grow at one of the fastest rates in the state, racing to keep up with its own infrastructure needs.

Among the problems with the 1961 interstate are peak hour delays that run from 15-to-45 minutes, due in part to highway curvatures that reduce sight lines and cause motorists to ride their brakes, the DOT says.

“If you’re going 84 eastbound you have a sight line problem as you are going toward Exit 4,” said Sharat Kalluri, a consulting project engineer, during a public meeting in the spring. “There are plans that would make I-84 much better in terms of the speed it’s made for.”

Progress on the early planning stages for I-84’s future, which is covered by \$17.5 million in state funding, follows headlines in August when the DOT floated driving on the shoulder as one of several “early action” projects that

could be in place in a few years instead of a few decades to ease highway congestion and improve Danbury's quality of life.

Among those early action projects was configuring 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.

The future of I-84

The I-84 of the future as engineers envision it today would have at least three travel lanes in both directions between the Route 7 interchange on the west side near Danbury Fair mall and the Route 7 interchange on the east end near AMC Danbury 16.

Although early concepts to straighten I-84's curves to improve travel flow proved to be more ambitious than practical, some minor straightening of the highway is planned.

"The ramps are going to be switched from the left-hand side to the right-hand side between interchanges at Exit 3 and Exit 7, and there are some slight shifts in alignment at interchange 3 and interchange 7 to get better curves," Kalluri said. "This project is going to be looking at replacing all the bridge structures, too."

On the west side, engineers believe they have a long-term solution to congestion problems between exits 3 and 4. The plan is to build a ramp from I-84 to Segar Street.

"A median barrier is going to be installed along I-84 to prevent any I-84 traffic to get to Lake Avenue," Kalluri said. "(Traffic) would have to use Segar Street to get to Lake Avenue. The Route 7 traffic would still be able to use Exit 4."

Similarly on the east end, engineers have a plan to cut down on congestion between exits 7 and 8. The plan is to add roads parallel to I-84 eastbound and I-84 westbound to channel Route 7 and Newtown Road traffic getting on and off the highway.

The most fluid part of the emerging I-84 master plan is at exits 5 and 6. Expect to hear more clarity about the DOT's vision the deeper the plan gets into environmental review.

"We are in a planning stage right now, but once these concepts move into the (environmental review) stage and we actually get about 30 percent of the design of the potential concept combinations and alternatives, at that point we might be talking about a piece of one concept and tying it in with a piece of another concept," said Black, the environmental consultant. "There is a lot of potential still for discussions with the public on how best to center area or any area of the study."