

A new kind of circle is coming around

At Routes 33 and 34, a roundabout will force drivers to slow down

Posted by the [Asbury Park Press](#) on 08/24/06

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COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

WALL — Getting around the Routes 33 and 34 circle can be a nerve-racking little ride.

Drivers who use it will tell you: The cars go too fast, the trucks go too slow, and nobody gives anybody a break.

Later next month, Earle Asphalt Co. of Farmingdale, contractors for the state Department of Transportation, will begin work on a \$2.57 million project to make this beast of a circle into a kinder, gentler roundabout — a traffic circle with approach roads that have smaller curves, which will force drivers to slow down.

Some drivers said they're skeptical that a roundabout will work here.

"I saw them (roundabouts) in Rhode Island, but they're on much smaller roads," said Dan Nagle, 48, of Howell on a recent weekday. "This is dangerous if you don't know what you're doing."

Nagle suggested the circle, also known as the Collingwood Circle, be replaced with a regular four-way intersection, which the state did with some other Shore area circles.

"The Freehold circle (Routes 33 and 9) is no longer a circle, and it seems to work," he said.

State transportation officials did consider that and other options, but said too much property would have had to be taken to do that, said Erin Phalon, DOT spokeswoman.

"The DOT studied a dozen alternatives, including a 'T' intersection," Phalon said. "A conventional intersection was ruled out because too much property would have to be taken, and a lot of businesses are close to the circle."

In addition to altering the approach roads to the circle, the project also will create a new ramp to county Route 547, Phalon said. That change will reduce rear-end accidents, she said.

Changing the turning radius in the approach roads to the circle will cause traffic to slow down and will help it move more safely, she said. Now, traffic in the circle has to yield to vehicles entering the circle.

"Traffic approaching will yield to traffic in the roundabout," Phalon said. "It will eliminate problems like having to stop and look over your right shoulder, which results in a blind spot when driving in a circle."

One of those businesses on the circle is a Citgo station and convenience store, where drivers talked about their circular experiences and what needs to be done.

"They should take the whole circle out and put in (traffic) lights like Route 70 and 35 (in Wall)," said Dan Kritch, 24, of Wall, who has to drive a large truck around the circle. "I don't see it (a roundabout) making it slower. Just take it out."

One problem Kritch has seen is that drivers have accidents and near misses because they misjudge what other vehicles are doing.

"People go too fast off (Route 33)," he said. "Trucks go slower than cars, and you have to look out for the cars."

Jennifer Ramos, 27, of Farmingdale has to travel the circle twice a day, to and from work.

"It's a pain in the butt," she said. "It's the fact that it's two lanes, and everyone is trying to go at once."

Ramos is skeptical about the roundabout helping to make it better.

"I don't think making it smaller will slow people down," she said, adding that the state should build a regular intersection instead.

Traffic consultant Michael J. Wallwork said he's heard those doubts before. An Orange Park, Fla.-based designer who's planned about 500 roundabouts, Wallwork said the concept is difficult for drivers who equate speed with efficiency.

"The perception people have is, 'faster is better,' " Wallwork said. "But there are places where they've built four roundabouts in a row, and there's now less traffic congestion."

One key fact is that vehicles entering a 40- to 50-mph stream of traffic need very large gaps in the traffic to safely accelerate, Wallwork noted.

So "circles are very big, very fast and very scary for some people," he said.

It seems counterintuitive, but slowing traffic to 20 mph through a roundabout actually eases the ability of drivers to enter and exit, he said.

"Because there's lots of little gaps (in traffic), drivers can enter the roundabout much more easily," Wallwork said. "Therefore it's safer, and a lot quicker."

The safety benefits of roundabouts were documented in a University of Maine study that found old-fashioned traffic circles had accident rates 3.5 to 6 times higher than roundabouts, mainly because of the speed factor, Wallwork said.

Wallwork is helping with a redesign proposal for traffic circles in Flemington, where Route 202 and other highways converge near outlet malls.

Last month, in an effort to alleviate congestion, the Monmouth County Board of Freeholders voted to authorize county engineers to receive bids to build a roundabout at Brookdale Community College's entrance on Newman Springs Road, which also is Route 520. Wallwork had served as an early consultant to the county on that project.

Construction on the Route 33/34 roundabout will be done in three phases, but most of the work and any lane closures will occur at night. Lane closures will generally not be allowed during weekday peak periods from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. or on weekends or holidays.

"Most of the work will be done at night and during off-peak hours," Phalon said.

"Construction can only close one lane at a time."

The first phase involves the new Route 547 ramp and the combined Route 33/34 road approaches to the circle and will be the only part of the project to require a detour, from September to October, Phalon said.

Traffic headed for Route 547 or Route 34 South will be detoured onto Route 33 West/34 North for 1 1/2 miles, where it will make a U-turn where the roads split and return on Route 33 East/34 North to access Route 547 and Route 34 South.

Most of the circle also will be repaved during the first phase.

The second phase involves reconstructing Route 33/34 North and South and the ramps to Route 33. This phase will take place during May and June 2007.

The third phase involves work on Route 33 in both directions. This work will be on the approaches for Route 33 East and West and will take place from July 2007 through September 2007.

Roadwork will be finished by September 2007, and all work will be completed by November, Phalon said.

Meanwhile, Nagle said he's not looking forward to construction.

"I just dealt with the construction on Route 9," he said. "It's a must to avoid."

Staff writer Kirk Moore contributed to this story.