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Highway officials crack down on speeding in East Lyme



A trooper with the Connecticut State Police last week patrolled for speeders on the northbound side of Interstate 95 at the Exit 74 interchange as traffic patterns in the 4.5-year, \$148 million work zone become increasingly tricky to navigate. (Photo contributed by the Connecticut Department of Transportation)

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East Lyme — Engineers with the Interstate 95 construction project are promising a strong law enforcement presence over the next two months to enforce the work zone’s 50 mph speed limit as shifting lanes become increasingly tricky to navigate.

Resident Engineer Robert Obey of the Glastonbury-based engineering firm GM2 said the realigned Exit 74 on-ramp that opened this past week is a temporary harbinger of a much larger change: The shifting by mid-December of northbound traffic all the way to the right so the rest of the span can be demolished and rebuilt over the coming year to improve sight lines.

He said he has strategically deployed two state troopers to work eight hours a day, at least five days a week, on the northbound side of Interstate 95 over the next two weeks. He expects increased coverage to continue through the end of the year.

“There’s nobody doing 50 mph,” he said. “The average speeds through here are 75.”

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Two days after the on-ramp opened, Obey on Thursday afternoon said 20 speeding tickets had been issued that day. He credited GPS apps with live traffic updates and police locators for helping to make drivers aware there are speed traps in the area.

He recounted the text message he received from one of the troopers with the message “speeds are way down today.”

Crews are about a year and a half into the 4.5-year, \$148 million project with the goal to reduce congestion and improve safety on the highway and Route 161.

The reconfigured and temporarily lengthened Exit 74 on-ramp has led to complaints from some drivers around town and on social media who say the left exit to Interstate 395 at Exit 76 now comes too quickly for those who need to cross congested highway traffic to get there.

Previously, the on-ramp quickly merged with highway traffic. Now, it spits drivers out just 1,200 feet shy of Exit 75.

“The vast majority of the complaints is that the 74 on-ramp location is, certainly, way downstream from where it was, and anybody that’s looking to take the left-hand exit is fighting the gross speeders that we have,” he said.

The other option would have been to keep the on-ramp closed through the end of the year, according to Obey.

“This project made a business decision to provide access to Exit 74 northbound,” he said. “And, quite frankly, anyone who goes to Electric Boat or Pfizer says ‘thank you,’ because now they don’t have to sludge through town and take the detour.”

He emphasized drivers need to obey the speed limit and be courteous to merging traffic in order for the temporary traffic pattern to work. His project team is working with the state Department of Transportation to come up with signage warning drivers that entering traffic may need to get over to the left lane.

While highway traffic has the right-of-way, he said officials are temporarily asking drivers to share that right-of-way responsibility with ramp traffic.

Obey detailed assigning one trooper to stake out the highway from the area of the Route 161 overpass and another under the Route 1 overpass going toward Waterford before the Interstate 395 merge.

“The intent of that is to catch speeders so people can get over to the left hand exit,” he said.

Changing the landscape

He said safe speeds and attention to the work zone will become even more important by the end of the year, when all northbound traffic is funneled into two, 11-foot lanes with 1-foot shoulders where the on-ramp currently exists.

“I would encourage people to drive through the work zone at the speed limit because in two months it isn’t going to look anything like it was,” he said. “We are going to radically change the landscape of

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I-95 northbound, and when you start driving here for the first time at excessive speeds, I can't guarantee you're going to get through the work zone safely."

He anticipated the return of speed cameras early next year, when the [DOT's Know the Zone program pilot](#) program becomes permanent. The initiative provides SUVs equipped with cameras to photograph and send tickets to vehicles going more than 15 mph over the limit.

The impending traffic pattern change is predicated on the completion of the first phase of the bridge replacement project that will ultimately create a wider span over Route 161. Come December, vehicles will be directed over the first new section of bridge into the narrow lanes while construction crews address the rest of the highway.

State Department of Transportation (DOT) project engineer Andrew Millovitsch said crews are working seven days a week in preparation to pour the bridge deck two weeks from now so the project can stay on schedule.

The massive project covers the interstate from the Exit 74 interchange to Exit 75. The engineers emphasized it does not extend to the left exit at Exit 76 that has been criticized as unsafe.

Both engineers said the area was once set to be addressed through the completion of Route 11, which currently dead-ends in Salem. Construction on the existing 8.5-mile highway from Colchester to Salem stopped in 1979, and plans to see it through to the intersection of I-395 and I-95 were officially scrapped in 2016.

Officials at the time blamed environmental factors and the estimated \$1 billion cost of extending Route 11 and rebuilding the 395 interchange.

Millovitsch said officials are focused now on the Exit 74 interchange because of the number of crashes there and the need to replace the aging bridge over Route 161.

Numbers from the University of Connecticut Crash Data Repository show there were 89 crashes, 42 with injuries, between exits 74 and 75 on the northbound side from 2018 to 2022.

There were 50 crashes from exits 75 to 76 north, including 15 with injuries, during the same time period.

A spokesman for the DOT could not by press time provide information about any plans to address the left-hand exit to 395.

"It is really up to the elected officials and the management of the DOT, the people who are actively involved in soliciting for projects," said Obey.