

Engineers squeeze in latest change on East Lyme I-95 project



By **Elizabeth Regan**

Day Staff Writer

e.regan@theday.com

East Lyme — Come Monday, drivers traveling north on Interstate 95 in the area of the Exit 74 interchange will feel the squeeze as traffic is shifted into two narrow lanes while the highway median becomes a construction zone.

Resident Engineer Robert Obey of the Glastonbury-based engineering firm GM2 said the impending shift will utilize concrete barriers to guide drivers into two, 11-foot-wide lanes with 1-foot shoulders compared to the typical 12-foot travel lanes with 3 to 4-foot shoulders.

The temporary pattern will remain in place for the next year so crews can move on to the middle phase of the four-year, \$148 million effort to widen and level the crash-prone highway by spring 2027.

“This project is going to completely relocate the I-95 northbound travel lane,” Obey said.

The southbound side will remain unchanged for now.

Heading north, drivers will find themselves on a section of highway that didn’t exist before workers broke ground on the project more than a year and a half ago.

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“The new section of the highway was built adjacent to existing I-95 northbound,” Obey said. “Everything we did in the first stage was to build a whole new piece of roadway parallel and adjacent to the existing highway.”

Work to date includes a new exit 74 off-ramp, a bridge to carry the two narrow lanes of traffic over Route 161, and the removal of 800 feet of ledge between exits 74 and 75.

The new, relatively flat span eliminates the hills and valleys that wreaked havoc on sight lines before state officials prioritized the massive reconstruction project. Difficulty seeing ahead has been identified as one of the lead factors in an atypically high number of crashes.

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

The grade changes that represent one of the most significant parts of the project will be evident to northbound drivers who find themselves looking down on the existing highway before the bridge, and up to the existing highway past the bridge. But green plastic glare screens sticking out from the concrete barriers will prevent them from getting too good of a view.

DOT Project Engineer Andrew Millovitsch said the purpose of the glare screen system – which he called an anti-rubberneck device and Obey referred to as a gawking screen – is three-fold. In addition to increasing visibility by reducing glare from the oncoming lanes, they help keep drivers focused ahead instead of becoming alarmed when they realize they’re traveling significantly above or below the existing highway.

“And they're also kind of shields for any construction debris,” he said.

Crews through the end of the project will extend those grade changes to the center of the highway and then to the southbound side. The existing overpass adjacent to the newly constructed bridge will be demolished and rebuilt in the same order.

Contractual obligations require GM2 and general contractor Manafort Brothers of Plainville to keep two lanes open at all times, with rare exceptions.

The engineers emphasized the importance of not exceeding the 50 mph speed limit in the new configuration with negligible shoulders.

He said the change will come with digital signs announcing the shift and state troopers enforcing the speed limit.

“There’s no room for error; you’re boxed in. A traffic accident there closes the highway,” Obey said. “So we want to do everything we can to avoid an accident because it has major impacts to the highway. Even getting emergency vehicles to something like that is difficult.”

Traffic cameras will monitor the lanes and members of law enforcement will be available to quickly react if a car becomes disabled, according to Obey.

He said the realignment should also resolve concerns from some drivers around town and on social media about a temporary Exit 74 on-ramp layout instituted in late October. The extended ramp

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since then has spit drivers onto the highway just 1,200 feet shy of exit 75, making it difficult for traffic to cross the congested highway to get to the Interstate 395 merge at Exit 76.

He said those entering the highway on the ramp will merge into traffic not far from the original merge.

“Now, you're hitting 95 about 500 feet further down the highway than it was before,” Obey said.

Ramp closures ahead

Immediate preparations for the Monday morning traffic shift will involve the closure of the Exit 74 on-ramp on Friday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. to allow for the paint on new lanes to dry.

On Sunday, the Exit 74 on-ramp, Exit 74 off-ramp and Exit 75 off-ramp will be closed from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. Monday, when the new traffic pattern will go into effect.

Detours will take drivers to Exit 81 in Waterford, where they'll get back on the highway to either continue north or backtrack south.

The traffic shift was originally slated to go into effect in mid-December, but weeks of productivity from the prolonged dry spell put the project ahead of schedule. Now, the engineers are working to get the reconfiguration into place before several days of rain expected next week sets them back again.

Obey said the forecast forced them to compress the schedule for rolling out the new northbound traffic pattern.

“And so, as a result of trying to make the change sooner than later to dodge the weather, you're going to see a little bit more impact to the traffic than we would like. But it's a seasonal issue and it's a weather pattern issue,” he said.

The engineers have long emphasized that each phase of the massive, years-long project depends on the timely completion of the one before it.

“We're forced into this to keep this project on schedule and to minimize our impact on traffic to the best we can,” Millovitsch said.