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Roadwork: Orange cones have some seeing red

By Patti Brandt Burgess

pburgess@record-eagle.com

Jul 1, 2021



Crews work on the construction of a roundabout at the intersection of Four Mile and Hammond roads on Wednesday afternoon in East Bay Township.

Record-Eagle/Jan-Michael Stump



TRAVERSE CITY — It's orange cone season on steroids in Grand Traverse County.

Several projects in the works at the same time spread across the county have some roads closed, some open only in one direction and some part of lengthy detours that add time to daily commutes.

Two closed bridges in downtown Traverse City compound the traffic issue, especially as officials anticipate as many as 500,000 people may descend on the region for the National Cherry Festival that runs July 3 through 10.

A roundabout being installed on East Hammond Road has the road open to westbound traffic only, while eastbound drivers are rerouted onto Three Mile Road, with the extra vehicles causing traffic back-ups and temper flare-ups.

Lou Burruezo, an Uber driver, recently sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic for about 30 minutes on Airport Road. Some of the extra traffic is because of the Hammond Road project, but not all.

“We’ve got a lot of extra people in town because of the Cherry Festival,” Burruezo said. “I think they could have timed things a little better.”

For some, like vacationer Nicholas Waterman, the roadwork is no big deal.

“When you’re on holiday mode you just let that stuff bounce off you,” said Waterman, of Chicago.

For others, like Curt Stephenson, the number of projects is frustrating.

“It’s everywhere,” said Stephenson, who spends his summers in Traverse City. “It’s almost insane trying to get together for cocktails. Where do we go? Can everybody get in?”

Construction of the roundabout has an end date of Sept. 30, but may be done earlier than that, said Brad Kluczynski, Grand Traverse County Road Commission manager. The work is being done by Team Elmer’s.

Other county projects in the works are the Garfield Road bridge and two bridges on East River Road, all of which have at least one lane open to traffic, Kluczynski said.

A project that widened Supply Road now is complete and another that reconstructed Walton Road is nearly finished, with the road expected to be open to traffic Friday, he said. The project was delayed from last year because of the pandemic, he said.

Several smaller projects also will be done through the summer, including some that have been on hold because of the rain, Kluczynski said.

Lynn Groleau lives on East Hammond down the road from her business, Groleau's Farm Market. On one of the first days of construction she witnessed road rage when a driver got out of his vehicle to swear at another driver he thought was going the wrong way.

When the man wouldn't stop swearing Groleau set him straight, letting him know he was the one at fault. Several drivers were confused those first few days, Groleau said, and she and her employees watched as one after another vehicle blew by in the wrong direction.

Sheriff's deputies soon caught on and began policing the area, she said.

Groleau's Farm Market is located in the thick of construction. Groleau has kept it open, but has seen sales drop by about half. A popular spot for an after-dinner treat, the market has also seen sales of ice cream drop by about 90 percent, she said.

"We'll survive it," Groleau said. "We know it was coming for over a year so we planned for it."

Hours of operation at the market were cut and some part-time positions were not filled this year. The business never closed during the pandemic, so it is in good shape, she said.

"COVID did not hurt us. We had a really good summer last year, which is helping us to survive this summer."

Kluczynski said the projects are done by three different agencies — the county, the city and MDOT — when funding is available and within their own timeframe. The three bridges being reconstructed by the county were done by the same company and were packaged together to reduce costs.

"It's a very intricate schedule that keeps their people working without us having to absorb extra costs," he said.

Kim Chambo is a shopper for a grocery delivery company. The Mesick resident has had the job for less than two weeks and hasn't had any problems getting through a construction zone on M-37 south of Chums Corner, where the Michigan Department of Transportation is widening the state highway and adding two roundabouts.

"There are enough ways around it that it isn't really a big deal," Chambo said.

What is a big deal is work that has the Mesick bridge closed, which adds a half hour to the time she spends running around town, she said. She's also a little tired of having to wash the dirt off her car from traveling the back roads.

In Traverse City, both the Park Street and the South Cass Street bridges are closed for extensive work, creating havoc in an already traffic-congested downtown. Both bridges will be closed until November.

Work on the East Eighth Street bridge will take place July through November, and the replacement of the West Front Street bridge is scheduled to start in September and end by July 2022.

All but West Front Street are part of a \$4.9 million contract, with MDOT covering most of the cost from its State Local Bridge Fund and the city paying \$1.11 million, as previously reported.

Kat Paye, executive director of the Cherry Fest, said the festival is one of the first major events since the state's post-pandemic reopening June 22. If hotel reservations are any indication, the festival will hit high numbers as it has in the past.

Festival-goers are encouraged to take a bus or a shuttle or ride a bike to the festival, Paye said.

"Our biggest thing is encouraging the use of alternate transportation," Paye said. "Even without the bridges closed, parking downtown for the festival is a challenge."

Waterman has some good advice to get through road construction season.

"Be kind to everyone."

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Patti Brandt Burgess

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