

How to make a good new highway better

Written by Ozaukee Press

Wednesday, 26 September 2012 16:28

The DOT provided a vastly improved Highway 33 with smart use of roundabouts; the City of Port is making it even better by getting rid of an excess of unneeded signs.

On Nov. 14 the Port Washington Chamber of Commerce will present its annual City Beautification Award for “contributions to the community through beautifying our landscape.” We nominate the members of the Port Washington Board of Public Works and Common Council for this honor.

They deserve it for standing up to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and insisting that some 30 redundant, unnecessary and unsightly traffic signs be removed from the new Highway 33 at the western edge of the city.

That 30 signs can be removed without conflicting with federal highway safety regulations speaks volumes about the wretched excess of signage inflicted on this rebuilt highway connection to the Grand Avenue entrance to Port Washington.

Port Washington officials were counting on the new and improved Highway 33 gateway to be an aesthetic upgrade, thanks to removing the Highway LL overpass, burying utility wires, installing decorative street lights and elaborately landscaping the median. But then came the DOT’s sign barrage.

The DOT plastered the roadside, the median and even the sky with signs pointing out what, as one city official put it, was obvious to any motorist alert enough to qualify for a drivers license.

Repetitive signs were posted around crosswalks already marked with large rectangles on the pavement. Left-turn lanes, which anyone in a conscious state could recognize as left-turn lanes and were marked on the pavement for good measure, were excuses for more signs. Beefy metal structures were erected for elevated signs repeating information about roundabouts provided with other markers.

The state initially resisted the effort to remove the superfluous signage, but the city persevered. The Board of Public Works voted to take down the sign clutter and the Common Council added an exclamation point to the action with a ratifying vote. The city will have to pay the cost of taking down the signs. The estimated \$2,000 to do that will be money well spent; the money spent by the DOT to erect the forest of signs was not.

The Highway 33 project will be declared finished Friday morning with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. With construction lingering on for more than a year, it has been a long, difficult haul

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for businesses along the road and a persistent irritation for frequent travelers on the route. All things considered, though, it was worth the aggravation.

Even though the four-lane highway/street has a lower speed limit than the old two-lane Highway 33 (rather counter-intuitively), it makes travel between Port Washington and Saukville quicker and more efficient, thanks to the wise use of roundabouts at three intersections.

It is to the DOT's credit that the agency specified the roundabouts even though they remain controversial in Wisconsin. When State Rep. Duey Stroebel of Cedarburg recently asked his constituents in a survey what they thought of roundabouts, 59% said they disapproved of them; only 37% liked them.

This can probably be chalked up to merely an age-old distrust of the new and different, for roundabouts come with a host of advantages over traditional road crossings. For one, they're safer. A wealth of data makes the case that roundabouts have substantially fewer serious crashes than traditional intersections.

Beyond that, the charm of these traffic circles is that they keep traffic moving. This is critical at the two intersections in the Saukville portion of the new Highway 33 that have roundabouts. Before the roundabout was built at Northwoods Road and Highway 33, southbound and northbound vehicles had a hard time getting across the intersection at peak traffic times. Driver frustration probably contributed to a number of collisions

At the old Market Street intersection, waiting for permission from the fleeting green light to enter or cross Highway 33 could seem like an eternity. With the roundabout, there is less waiting, less fuel wasted idling and less frustration.

It is true that roundabouts require something stops signs and red traffic lights don't—making a judgment on when to yield the right of way. That's hardly too much to ask of people licensed to drive.

The new Highway 33 is generally a success and will be more so when the City of Port Washington rids the road of 30 unnecessary signs. The officials responsible for that deserve recognition for an act of civic beautification.