

M-275 Cancellation Will Stymie Motorists

The decision to cancel the north-south M-275 freeway in western Oakland County is the latest in a series of blows suffered by this county's motorists who desperately need major access thoroughfares.

That decision was made by the Michigan State Highways and Transportation Commission, against the advice of its own staff.

Together with footdragging on several other major highway projects in Oakland County, the cancellation of M-275 represents a profound renegeing on state responsibility to its second most populous county, said Road Commissioners John R. Gnau, Jr., Chairman; William M. Richards, Vice Chairman; and Fred D. Houghton.

The state has yet to complete I-696 east-west across the most urban part of the county. The state has yet to build the promised M-59 freeway east-west from Pontiac to US-23. The state has balked on extending Northwestern Highway into rapidly developing south-central Oakland County.

Failure to build these thoroughfares as long planned has condemned hundreds of thousands of west-central Oakland County residents to continued darts and dashes across local roads, holdups at hundreds of intersections and hesitancy to use many of the region's fine attractions.

If the effects of cancelling M-275 and footdragging on the other mentioned highways were confined to central county residents the blow would be bad enough. But, the impact is bound to spread to existing thoroughfares, increasing traffic on the already congested I-696 and I-96 across southern Oakland County, Telegraph Road, and other state, county, and local roads.

All county motorists who have paid for years into the state Motor Vehicle Highway Fund (MVHF) with their gasoline taxes and license plate fees are being shortchanged while the state has built roads in Wayne County, outstate and in the upper peninsula.

Oakland County with 668,945 registered vehicles, is second only to Wayne County in the number of highway vehicle owners that pay into the fund.

These motorists have been patiently waiting for promised state thoroughfares long planned and well publicized.

Widening of M-59 west of Pontiac is so long overdue it is no longer just a joke. Once planned as a freeway from Telegraph Road to US-23 near Oakland County's western border, M-59 today is a congested five-lane and two-lane road. Yet it must serve some of the more dense commercial strip development, the second busiest airport in this state, two major state parks (and three others nearby) and a rapidly burgeoning population that must depend on M-59 for travel to and from jobs, regional shopping and major entertainment attractions.

M-59 does all this without even mentioning its function as a funnel for huge volumes of traffic from west-central Oakland County to the only existing major arterial highways available: Telegraph Road, I-75, and US-23.

Telegraph Road's importance is well recognized by the state, which is currently widening that artery between 12 Mile Road and M-59 in Pontiac. Of course, the state originally planned eight lanes the full length and has doomed Telegraph to premature congestion the day it opens

by opting for only six lanes in all except commercially zoned areas.

The decision to build only a six-lane Telegraph was admitted by State Highway Commission spokesmen to be based, in part, on expectation that Northwestern Highway will be extended into central Oakland County to divert some traffic from Telegraph, and that M-275 would be built to divert heavy north-south truck and long-distance auto traffic.

Alas, the State Highway Commission is fighting in court to abandon its commitment to extend Northwestern Highway!

Oakland County motorists have been begging for years for adequate east-west state thoroughfares. I-696 through the most urban area of the county east of Telegraph was to have provided some help.

Ironically, when I-696 is completed, it will only help prove the folly of not building M-275 and of not extending Northwestern Highway. In the years since I-696 east of Telegraph was planned, several developments have occurred which strain the capacity of I-696 west of Telegraph and I-96 across southern Oakland County to the west to which I-696 connects.

Already traffic backups on the four-lane I-696 west of Telegraph are common. Opening of an I-96 route to Wayne County's western suburbs, which connects at the junction of I-696 with east-west I-96, has been one contributing factor. Another is the rapid housing, commercial and industrial development in southwestern Oakland County. Just recently a single major commercial development—the Twelve Oaks Mall with its huge Hudson's store—added another load of traffic.

Of course, Hudson's planners expected that M-275 would be built and thus absorb some of the traffic.

Hudson's was not alone. Other businesses, local government units, and hundreds of citizens have made critical decisions for years based on expectation that the state would keep its promises for major highway arteries in Oakland County.

Raising expectations and then failing to deliver is one sure way to create problems. In this case the problem created is critical overloading of already congested county and local highways, with the result that county and local road agencies are hard-pressed to compensate for the unkept state promises.

His Job Is To Protect Workers, Public, Costs

Russ Simpson has a job with the Oakland County Road Commission that is nearly unique, but which may soon spread to construction agencies all over the nation.



Russ Simpson

His title is the somewhat dowdy "utilities coordinator," but his job is credited with saving utility companies hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, which helps reduce consumer rate increases.

He also saves the Road Commission costly time and effort that might result from engineering without the full knowledge of utility factors, thereby getting a project underway and completed, said John L. Grubba, Managing Director.

Most importantly, his efforts help save lives and injuries that can result from gas line breakin explosions or accidental contact with high voltage electrical lines.

Simpson sees to it that Road Commission projects avoid breaking into such lines, or into telephone, water

or sewer lines. First he learns where such lines are. He works with the Road Commission's Engineering Department to help design over, under, or around existing utilities when possible. When design can't do the whole trick, Simpson works with the utility companies to have lines moved well in advance of planned construction.

It sounds simple, but consider that one county contractor refuses to work on a certain street intersection because from past experience he knows the "spaghetti" network of utilities there. That "spaghetti" includes all the private utilities and the sewer and water lines of several abutting communities.

Consider also that several contractors know Simpson's successes at pre-construction utility clearance and call him for a report prior to bidding on Road Commission contracts. "I can't prove it, but I've got to believe we get a better bid price because they know there won't be any holdups on the job," said Simpson.

A spokesman for one utility company said Road Commission damages to that company's lines have been reduced by half annually since the use of "Miss Dig" one-call notification and pre-planning of construction. Line damages occurred 2,400 times on that company's lines the year before Simpson started.

The way Simpson goes about his job is partially the result of the background he had and the conviction that break-ins can be avoided if everyone involved communicates.

Consultants Used For Tri-County Plan

The tri-county transit plan of the Wayne and Oakland County Road Commissions was developed for the road agencies by Transportation Planning Associates, a Bloomfield Hills consulting firm. The plan is based on an origin and destination study conducted this past September and October throughout Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties by Market Opinion Research.

"Market Opinion Research has established a record of unusually high accuracy in election polls it has conducted for Detroit newspapers and others. The firm's marketing research services are widely used and respected by private industry, as well," said John L. Grubba, managing director of the Oakland County Road Commission.

He said the data gathered by the firm for the road commissions covers origins and destinations of trips tri-county residents make for work, shopping, recreation and other purposes. He said it will be useful

for years to come in helping the road commissions plan ahead for maintenance and improvement of roads.

He said the decision to make a new origin and destination study resulted from the road commissions' recognition that the most recent such study is now 10 years old and did not contemplate the effect of the energy crisis and other factors in the intervening years that have shaped the actual growth and development of the tri-county area.

Transportation Planning Associates was established in 1971, in La Jolla, California by its president, Russell Thielman, of Bloomfield Hills. He had previously been a vice president of Rohr Industries, a diversified supplier of transportation systems, from 1966 to 1971. Thielman has directed transportation studies in such major U.S. cities as Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Cleveland, New York, and the District of Columbia during his decade as a transportation professional.