

Biker pedals Northwest passage

BY JANICE TIGAR-KRAMER
SPECIAL WRITER

Paul Riggio of Farmington Hills keeps fit riding a bicycle 6 1/2 miles to his job in West Bloomfield Township. But his daily commute includes a valuable added benefit that has nothing to do with maintaining muscle tone.

"To avoid gridlock, a bike's the only way to travel," said Riggio, who manages MGM Bicycle & Fitness Equipment at Northwestern Highway and Orchard Lake Road. "I ride on the sidewalk along Orchard Lake, gliding past traffic. The area's a sea of cars during rush hour."

Riggio even schedules his employees' lunch breaks and bank deposits before or after peak travel times, but the traffic backup at 14 Mile, Northwestern Highway and Orchard Lake Road can last for hours. The evening rush, Riggio said, runs 3 to 6:30 p.m.

"When Detroit empties around 5 p.m., Northwestern is packed," he said. "From the store, we see drivers waving their fists and shouting at each other. It's a mess."

Besides habitual traffic snags at the highly traveled intersections bordering Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield Township, accidents are commonplace. The 14 Mile/Orchard Lake crossing — the site of 219 accidents from 1993 to 1995 — is Oakland County's ninth-highest accident site, according to a recent report from the Traffic Improvement Association of Oakland County.

The Michigan Department of Transportation's (MDOT) offered a novel remedy for gridlock at 14 Mile, Orchard Lake and Northwestern — installing three roundabouts, or traffic circles commonly used in Europe. So far, replacing traffic lights with traffic circles at an intersection that handles some 85,000 cars a day has generated "skeptical optimism" among local officials, said Tom Bissell, Farmington Hills' public services director.

In theory, a roundabout allows up to five lanes of traffic, traveling at about 20 miles per hour, to enter the traffic circle. Vehicles enter the circle at a 30-degree angle and always travel side by side. There's no stops or

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yield signs, and vehicles in the roundabout always have the right of way. Though traffic seems to crawl toward the circle, gridlock is avoided because vehicles never stop moving.

"The idea should be looked at," Bissell said, "but it's not something we can decide overnight. Since it's a radical departure from what we're used to, there's bound to be criticism."

A roundabout costs some \$300,000, compared to about \$15 million for a traditional intersection. A double roundabout at a Vail, Colorado, intersection has reduced the accident rate by about 80 percent, according to MDOT. Injury accidents also are reduced in a roundabout because vehicles can't be bronzed.

"Residents would love an innovative solution that would safely move traffic along Orchard Lake," West Bloomfield Supervisor Jody Hood said, "but my gut feeling is that the area's too congested for a traffic circle."

Farmington Hills Mayor Aldo Vagnozzi agrees: "It's a problem intersection, but could a roundabout handle the volume of cars?"

Vagnozzi and Hood both said a loss congested crossing, such as 14 Mile and Haggerty in West Bloomfield Township, might be a better location for a traffic circle. Public hearings in West Bloomfield Township and Farmington Hills will determine if a triple roundabout will be used. If the idea wins public approval, and seems feasible to local officials, the intersection would be the first in North America with three traffic circles.

Whatever the solution, local officials said, road improvements can't come soon enough for exasperated motorists who travel Orchard Lake, 14 Mile and Northwestern during rush hour.

"We pay a high percentage of taxes to the (Oakland County) road commission, and many peo-

ple think we may not be receiving our fair share of highway funding," West Bloomfield's Hood said.

"The truth is, the system works slowly. We could decide what we need to do today, but not be able to get funding for three years."

In the meantime, Farmington Hills' Vagnozzi said he's depending on the Haggerty Connector (M-5) to relieve — but not solve — congestion along Orchard Lake Road. Road work to extend M-5 from 12 Mile to 14 Mile will begin this summer, but the exit won't be operational until 1999. Long-range plans call for extending the freeway to Pontiac Trail, a boon to motorists who now use Orchard Lake Road to travel north to areas such as Commerce Township and Milford.

So much road work, so little funding.

"We're all handicapped by a lack of road funds. In addition to local road improvements, we could use an exit at Inkster on I-696," Vagnozzi said.

"There are a lot of demands on highway money right now," said Ed Waddell, MDOT transportation planner. "The (Northwestern/Orchard Lake Road/14 Mile) intersection is troublesome, and as the funding stream moves along, this area will be at the top of the pile."

Waddell expects the three-way crossing that links Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield Township to be included in the state's Transportation Improvement Program for fiscal years 1999 to 2001.

Also included in the proposed road project are the following improvements:

- Widen Northwestern Highway to six lanes from 12 Mile to 14 Mile.
- Widen Orchard Lake Road from 14 Mile to Maple Road to six lanes. If Michigan U-turns are added along Orchard Lake

Road, stop lights will be eliminated.

Widen Maple Road to four lanes from Orchard Lake Road to Haggerty and add a boulevard similar to one on 12 Mile in Farmington Hills.

Add several turn lanes on 14 Mile, so motorists can enter subdivisions without delay during rush hour. Though the road's north side is in West Bloomfield, 14 Mile is under Farmington Hills' jurisdiction.

Cost for the road project, to be paid with state and federal highway funds, is estimated at \$20 million. Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield have already approved MDOT's preliminary ideas for the road work, but final plans will hinge on public opinion and the availability of funding.

"Traffic congestion is a priority for us," West Bloomfield's Hood said. "It was a big issue when I took office in 1992, and it's still a problem. We've got some time to develop solutions, and we will fix it."

Clarenceville lends ball field to parochial school

The Clarenceville Board of Education has given permission to St. Michael's Catholic School in Livonia to use its athletic field three times this fall.

The Clarenceville District includes a portion of southeastern Farmington Hills. The board approved the request for the rental of the athletic field by St. Michael's School Sept. 5, 1996 and 10.

In other action on July 25, the board received a letter from a parent regarding concerns about the shared teaching assignment at Botsford Elementary.

The board received a letter from a parent concerning drainage problems in the field at Botsford.

The board received a cost comparison report on the unit ventilators purchased for Grandview Elementary.

Frank Saura, construction manager at J.J. Alberici, presented the board with a report on construction change orders approved by the superintendent.

The board received a construction progress report from Jack Schiffman, Clarenceville maintenance manager, along with information on recent change orders approved by the superintendent.

The board agreed that the superintendent should develop a plan for the upkeep of all school grounds as well as the high school north property line.

The board received information on new computer equipment ordered by Superintendent Tom Tattan for his office.

The board approved a high school attendance policy, effective 1996-97.

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