

Troy's 'test-tube' traffic system drives Troy into the future

By DAVE VARGA

By Dave Varga
Brent Baer, managing director of the Road Commission for Oakland County, now that its SCATS system aimed at improving traffic flow has been turned on.

Troy's drivers have been testing the computerized traffic light system where it's been running — off and on — for months now.

The reviews of residents haven't been very positive. There have been numerous complaints about stuck or malfunctioning traffic signals forcing traffic jams.

Most politicians acknowledged the problems, noting technical malfunctions and growing pains.

"Like any demonstration project," said U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, D-Southfield, whose district covers Troy, "it's expected there's going to be some problems."

"This is a test-tube," noted U.S. Rep. Bob Carr, who helped

secure federal grant money.

On the positive side, road commission officials cited a preliminary study showing a decrease in traffic stops along areas where SCATS has been operating. Cutting stops reduces accident rates, pollution and slows the need for adding more traffic lanes.

Long-suffering drivers

John Grubba, deputy county executive and former director of the road commission, has been cited for his foresight in pushing for the SCATS plan. Grubba, in turn, acknowledged the \$2 million investment made by the Oakland County Board of Commissioners that started the project rolling.

He also noted the cooperation of state, county and local officials in getting SCATS rolling.

County commissioner John Garfield, whose 9th District covers Troy and Rochester, pointed

out the \$50,000 trip to Australia that helped bring back the technology — and North American SCATS rights — for the system. While the trip was criticized at the time, Garfield said, "That was well-spent money."

Federal and county money was only spent in Troy, Auburn Hills and Rochester Hills are next in line for SCATS. Auburn Hills will pay \$500,000 to join the system; Rochester Hills will pay \$700,000.

Rochester Hills council president Jon Buller said work is expected to begin after January.

"We're very hopeful it will live up to expectations," he said.

Auburn Hills manager Dennis McGee agreed, saying they're eager to hook up, with some cameras already installed at the new Squirrel Road intersections recently constructed. "We kind of shuddered when we heard of the problems in Troy. But, it is kind of early to do much analysis on it," McGee said.

Changing green time

A tour of the Traffic Operations Center showed just how the computer-driven intersection cameras draw imaginary squares on each lane at an intersection. Cars are counted as they travel through the squares.

Theoretically, the light could be green 50 percent of the time going north/south and green 50 percent of the time going east/west. After each light cycle, the computer counts cars and, based on flow, then "redistributes the amount of green time," according to Les Akey of the road commission.

The system also allows adjustments to the left-turn traffic arrows, a source of many complaints by rush-hour drivers. Baer said the system should accommodate left-hand turners by:

- changing the length of time of the arrow;
- adding left-turn arrow time at

the end of the cycle, in addition to the beginning of the cycle; and

- eliminating the left-turn cycle altogether if there isn't any traffic.

Along with the intersection lights, staffers at the traffic center operate four digital video cameras that identify accidents or stalled cars and perform speed studies.

A second facet of the system coordinates the traffic signal information and a system of special roadside infrared beacons into an interactive, in-car computer system. It allows drivers to enter a destination and learn the best route, based on traffic.

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