

Roundabouts a learning experience for drivers

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Traffic enters the roundabout intersection at Hunt Club Road and Milburn Road in Old Mill Creek. | Thomas Delany Jr.~Sun-Times Media ORG XMT: CST1301291703001994

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For motorists at Lake County's first trio of roundabouts, fender benders were part of what experts called a learning curve — no pun intended.

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A News-Sun investigation found that Lake County's new roundabouts — the traffic circles designed to keep vehicles moving at intersections that have traditionally featured stop signs — actually increased accidents in the weeks after they first opened. However, the data showed, accidents with injuries dropped to zero in 2012.

"You don't have any of those head-on accidents," said John Nelson, engineer of traffic for the Lake County Division of Transportation.

The county's first roundabout at Everett and Riverwoods roads near Lincolnshire, opened in November 2010. In 2009, the last full year the intersection was controlled with four-way stop signs, Lake County Sheriff's Police reported 12 property-damage accidents at Everett and Riverwoods, with two involving injury to passengers.

In 2011, the new roundabout configuration saw a total of nine accidents, two involving injuries. Then came 2012 — for the entire 12-month period, sheriff's police recorded one accident at the intersection, and no injury was reported.

"We've had some minor crashes, but we've seen the numbers go down, and hopefully they'll keep heading that way," said Nelson.

He added that from his experience, motorists who grew up on stop signs do have to acclimate themselves to the fundamental principles of roundabouts, including reducing speed when approaching the intersection, yielding to traffic already in the circle and looking to the left throughout the process.

The results hint at what was predicted by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) when it issued a strategy report in 2009 lobbying for construction of roundabouts.

The regional planning organization, offering to assist with long-range design and promotion of roundabouts where appropriate, touted a National Cooperative Highway Research Program study

that found a 77 percent reduction in injury crashes at previously signalized intersections, and a 48 percent reduction in total crashes at intersections converted to roundabouts.

A similar if not exact situation is reflected in the numbers for the two roundabouts that opened on Hunt Club Road near Old Mill Creek in the summer of 2011 — one at Millburn Road and the other at Wadsworth Road, both of which were previously three-way stops.

At Hunt Club and Millburn, there were 15 reported accidents in 2010, two involving injury, and 16 in 2008, with another two involving injuries.

In 2011, there were 14 — seven in a nine-week period between late September and early December alone, in the first autumn following the opening of the roundabout.

The total number then dropped to 12 in 2012, with no personal-injury accidents reported.

Wadsworth and Hunt Club recorded five accidents in 2010 and seven in 2009, then saw the number jump to 13 in 2011 — nine between the middle of October and New Year's Eve, again after the roundabout opened.

In 2012, the first full year of roundabout traffic, sheriff's police reported 12 property-damage accidents, none involving injuries.

CMAP officials also pointed to statistics from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety that reported a 37 percent reduction in overall crashes at intersections reconstructed with a roundabout, with crashes involving fatalities trimmed by 90 percent.

Advocates of the roundabout concept say the results are produced by slower speeds generated inside traffic circles and the fewer contact points created when cars don't arrive at right angles to one another.

The area's roster of roundabouts will increase to four in 2013 with the construction of another traffic circle at Cedar Lake and Monaville roads near Lake Villa, while Gurnee officials are eyeing one in their community.

In November, the Lake County Board signed off on an agreement with the Illinois Department of Transportation to commit a final \$405,000 in matching funds toward the project, and construction is now scheduled to shut down the intersection for 71 days between April 13 and Sept. 13.

With that addition, all four of the county's roundabouts will involve roadways with a single lane in each direction.

Nelson said that the next step, for both regional planners and motorists, is to craft a roundabout out of a multilane intersection.

"Wisconsin has several multilane roundabouts," he said. "We don't have any in Illinois, but we are looking at them in the future."