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# Plan to Close Jughandles Draws Public Ire

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Emotions ran high at the New Jersey Department of Transportation's (DOT) public meeting to discuss their pilot project to test jughandle closures at Harrison and Washington Streets to relieve traffic congestion on Route 1.

Around eighty Princeton residents showed up to voice their concerns that the proposed rerouting of traffic would increase congestion on Princeton streets.

The pilot project will test the effect of these jughandle closures on traffic flow. The project is scheduled to start mid-March and run for about eight weeks. If the project runs smoothly, DOT will extend it to twelve weeks, overlapping with the opening in late May of the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro.

Representatives from DOT were present to describe how motorists would turn onto Harrison and Washington Streets when traveling on Route 1. During the trial period, a motorist on Route 1 North will no longer be able to make a left turn or U-turn at the jughandle at Washington Road or Harrison Street and will need to use the overpass on Scudder's Mill Road. Conversely, if traveling on Route 1 South, a motorist will not be able to use the jughandle to make a left turn or U-turn at Washington Road and will need to use the overpass at Alexander Road.

Many Princeton residents were not happy with the planned change. Robert Levine called it "an experiment that doesn't make sense. You have to have

some insight to have an experiment, and these guys, they don't have any insight." Candace Preston, also from Princeton, expressed concern that "Faculty Road is already very backed up when the university lets out," and "there's only one way out of Princeton when it floods: Washington Road. It will be interesting to see what people say about it."

As Mark Rollo, DOT representative, put it, "A few cars come up Route 1 North and try to make a left turn into Princeton. The jughandle is such a small little loop that the cars back up into the live lanes of Route 1. It closes up the slow lane, and there are all sorts of residual back up and delays. By eliminating the left turns and U-turns there, we send them back up [to Scudders Mill Road] or back down [to Alexander Road]."

When asked about the University's Arts Education Transit project and the Dinky move, Rollo said DOT is considering that as well as the hospital move across Route 1. "The point I'm trying to emphasize to everyone is that there are very few cars trying to make these left turns and they block up the whole of Route 1. It's roughly one car a minute [during peak hours]." Rollo went onto say that DOT has run computer models to the effect that closing the jughandles is the correct decision but that people don't believe the models, which is why they are running a trial. New car counts will be taken before the pilot study begins in March.

Donna Simon, General Assemblywoman who was chosen to fill the late Peter Biondi's seat, was present along with Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli. "We are here on a fact-finding mission. Any issue the Princeton community has on traffic is of the utmost importance. We want to be sure that it won't add to congestion on other roads and will want to wait until the new hospital is built to see the full effect."

Mark Schreiber, former candidate for Princeton Township committee, feels that DOT is trying to shift the congestion of Route 1 "squarely onto the back of residents. They want to turn Alexander Road, which is already so congested, into the primary connector into Princeton. Faculty Road, which will have more traffic shifted onto it, is a private road and not designed for that amount of traffic."

DOT counted cars during morning (7:45-8:45 AM) and evening (5:00-6:00 PM) peak hours. Measured in fifteen minute segments, Washington Street sees 59 left turns (estimated one car per minute) in the morning and 67 left turns in the afternoon. Harrison Street saw a higher number of turns at 139 in the morning peak hour and 139 in the afternoon peak hour.

Richard Hammer, Assistant Commissioner of Capital Program Management, says the cost of the jug handle closures should not run even half of the widening of Harrison Street, which he says cost around \$1 million. Mark Rollo estimates the cost to be in the tens of thousands of dollars. Costs have already been associated with the Penn's Neck project, which cost half a billion dollars but has not been funded.

According to Hammer, there's a low cost to the pilot study, which is the only way to determine the effect of the jug handle closures. Anthony Attansio, Assistant Commissioner for Government and Community Relations, says that DOT plans to hold a second public forum at the end of the study to announce the results.

During the study, data capture will be ongoing with ATRs or automatic traffic recorders set up on Scudders Mill Road, on Alexander Road (in three locations: south of the Dinky overpass, near Route 1 and Canal Point Boulevard, and near Faculty Road) and on Faculty Road near Princeton University. Along with the ATRs, DOT employees will be manually tallying cars at various traffic points and cameras will be collecting data as well.

As Hammer told the group, "The problem we have is that congestion on Route 1 has gotten to the point where we are losing the through lane capacity of Route 1. The movements that people are making at each of these intersections (Harrison and Washington) are taking away one of these three lanes, particularly during peak hours." Hammer went on to say that this is a serious problem given that there will be a major medical facility opening along Route 1, which will bring more traffic and emergency personnel to the highway. It is imperative, says Hammer, that we have a highway that is functioning to the greatest extent possible and that we have traffic that will move.

In response to a Princeton resident's complaint that DOT has sprung the jughandle closures as a "total surprise" calling the idea "cockamamie," and saying that they can wait until the hospital opens, DOT commissioner James Simpson said that he has met at least twice with five mayors and has had three meetings with Princeton University. The study was supposed to take place last year but DOT waited until now to respect the wishes of the university and to ease the Princeton public into the changes. According to Simpson, "the modeling says it's a done deal. In NYC and Washington, DC, it would be done. However, we're doing the study to see the unintended consequences on Alexander Street, Faculty Road and elsewhere."

While money has been spent recently on the modeling, Hammer told the group that DOT has been studying the situation for around twenty years, with millions of dollar spent.

***About the Author »***



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Bonnie Schultz has worked as a technology and marketing writer in the Boston area. She moved here in 1997 and is the mother of two boys. Since 2007, Bonnie has been blogging about food and community happenings in the Princeton area.

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