

Fast Forward: There's method to the exit-number madness

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When the newest section of Greensboro's Outer Loop comes online soon, motorists will need to learn a different numbering system for exits along what is now Interstate 40 through town.

Sharp-eyed Fast Forward reader Carl Acquilino alerted us that an airport-area exit along I-40 near the (not-yet-open) western loop is No. 24, yet the one just before it at Gallimore Dairy Road is No. 211.

"What gives?" Acquilino wonders.

The new number results from a change in status for existing I-40 through Greensboro, which will take place in a matter of weeks when the next phase of the western loop opens from the airport area to Interstate 85 and the southern loop.

That new section of western loop will become I-40, and what is now I-40 — from the airport area east through town — will become Business 40.

Renamed Business 40 will need a new numbering scheme to distinguish it from the main route, said Mike Mills, the state Department of Transportation's division engineer for Guilford and four other counties.

"That '24' is part of the numbering system for Business 40 coming east from Winston-Salem," Mills said, noting that the I-40 system is numbered west to east.

Business 40 through Greensboro will have exit 24 for Piedmont Triad International Airport, exit 25 at Guilford College Road, exit 29 at High Point Road and so on.

Meanwhile, the new section of western loop will pick up I-40's numbering system from its beginning to its merger with I-85 and the existing loop near Groometown Road.

When it is officially open and designated I-40, the new loop will have No. 214 as its first exit, at the new I-40/Wendover Avenue interchange.

But wait, there's more: A third numbering system kicks in after the new section of western loop merges with I-85 in southwest Greensboro to become the southern loop.

At that point, the numbering system for I-85 takes over for the rest of southern loop's journey to pre-existing I-40/85, just west of Mt. Hope Church Road.

Confused? Well, fear not. As Shakespeare might have said (if he'd been a transportation engineer), an exit by any other number still goes to the same place.

Problems ahead?

Fast Forward reader Grace Titzer has spotted a potential problem involving Wendover Avenue, Guilford College Road and the new western loop.

She is concerned that the exit ramp from westbound Wendover onto Guilford College involves a sharp turn that used to be made from an exit-only lane. That allowed motorists to slow down sufficiently to make the turn at 10 mph, Titzer said.

But after construction of Wendover's new interchange with the nearby loop, the "exit-only" lane has become a through lane, dangerously mixing drivers traveling at full speed with those slowing to turn, Titzer said.

And when that new section of loop opens, that same lane also will be carrying traffic merging onto Wendover from the high-speed, interstate loop.

"I think I'll avoid that area when Painter opens," Titzer said, referring to the western loop's original local designation as Painter Boulevard.

Mills, DOT division engineer, said he appreciates the head's up.

His staff will take an in-depth look at that part of Wendover to see if any change is needed to improve safety.

"If it is, we'll definitely take action," he said.

Coastal express

Fast Forward aficionado Alan Berger wonders if it's true "that I-73 (currently U.S. 220 south of Greensboro) will eventually connect to I-95, thereby making the drive to the coast a lot quicker."

"If yes, when will it happen?" Berger wants to know.

DOT spokeswoman Lisa Crawley says yes, the linkage should be completed by the end of this year.

But although the entire trip from Guilford to I-95 in Robeson County will be on four-lane, divided highway, it will involve traveling on two new interstates, Crawley said.

The two newbies — I-73 and I-74 — converge near Randleman and travel south together along current U.S. 220 through Randolph, Montgomery and Richmond counties.

Near Hamlet, I-73 parts ways with I-74, making a hard right into South Carolina.

After the split, I-74 continues toward I-95, staying in North Carolina on a southeasterly course through Scotland, Robeson, Columbus and Brunswick counties.

It crosses I-95 near Lumberton.

That last section, from I-95 northeast toward Scotland County, is all that remains to be finished, Crawley said.

A bridge too late?

In a recent investigative report, <http://www.msnbc.com> listed North Carolina as the 10th worst state for having a backlog of 724 bridges that had not been inspected every two years as required by federal law.

In fact, about 500 of those bridges had been inspected within the time limit, but the findings were not forwarded to Washington because of a computer glitch, said Don Idol, who oversees state DOT's bridge inspection program.

"It was a coding error," Idol said.

The other 200-plus bridges, about 1.25 percent of the state's 17,723 bridges were inspected by the fall, but too late for inclusion in the data that <http://www.msnbc.com> used in its report, Idol said.

More attention has been focused on bridge inspection since August, when an interstate bridge collapsed in Minneapolis killing 13 people and injuring 100.

Broken plates?

Speaking of the Minneapolis tragedy, recent reports suggest that federal investigators think a contributing factor was faulty gusset plates.

The plates, which hold crucial support beams together, might have been too thin and weak to safely withstand the bridge's heavy traffic, the Washington Post reported recently.

If that's the case, it's good news for North Carolina. The state has very few bridges that use gusset plates, bridge supervisor Idol said.

"We only have about 30 left, somewhere in that range," Idol said. "Most of them are small, county-type bridges that were built a long time ago."

Have a question you want answered or need to vent about transportation issues? Send them to fastforward@news-record.com. Be sure to leave your name and a way for us to get in touch with you.