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Intersection design may turn corner

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Look again at the Greenfield Rotary. It could be changing, if engineers and planners have their way.

The "roundabout" - a century-old idea coming around again - drew about 40 highway officials from throughout the region to take another look at whether round might be the best way to go when it comes to redesigning intersections.

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McCulloch

"Nine times out of 10 it's a better choice," Howard McCulloch of the New York State Department of Transportation's Roundabout Design Unit told public works heads, planners and engineers at Massachusetts Highway Department's Northampton regional headquarters.

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Roundabouts - which, unlike rotaries, include design features to slow traffic to 15 or 20 miles an hour and require entering traffic to yield - are inherently safer, more efficient and less costly to operate than intersections with traffic signals, said McCulloch. Besides, with landscaping as a key element in calming approaching traffic, "They're prettier," he said.

Most roundabouts are a fraction of the size of the 660-foot-diameter Greenfield I-91 rotary, McCulloch said, and include signs, pavement markings and geometric design to encourage all but right-turning traffic to move toward the inside lane.

"Everyone tends to get in the outside lane," he said. "Otherwise they're afraid they won't get out."

Greenfield officials took a stab at setting up a mock roundabout at the town's Main Street intersection several years ago, but Public Works Director John Bean said, "People were edgy about using it. It was ugly and imposing, and clearly people didn't want it."

Set up with a minimum of advance notice and no provision for pedestrians, the experiment was quickly abandoned, said Bean. But he added, "It worked great. The wait time (for vehicles at the intersection) was cut like you wouldn't believe."

Redesigning the existing Greenfield rotary would be much more difficult because the width of Interstate 91 would require a double-roundabout "dumbbell" configuration. But McCulloch presented modifications of signs, with lanes painted, to encourage entering traffic to yield and circulating traffic to stay left, except when preparing to exit.

"It would make a huge difference," said McCulloch, whose department is designing 50 roundabouts in New York and several out-of-state.

Keith Wilson, transportation planner for the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, said he hopes to encourage Massachusetts Highway officials to make those limited changes as a way of making the rotary safer.

Bean said that he is personally more interested in trying to apply "traffic calming" engineering techniques to slow Federal Street vehicles in the area of Super John's Market. But he added, "If the town really felt strongly that would be important, we should be lobbying the state" about the rotary.

Other intersections where roundabouts could be useful around the county include the North Leverett Road at Routes 63 and 47 in Montague, said Wilson, and a five-way crossroads with Route 202 near the center of New Salem.

A roundabout design is being considered for a reconfigured Route 9 intersection at the Look Park entrance in Northampton. There, planners said Wednesday, provisions for pedestrian crosswalks and bicyclists are critical.

One of the last was built ~1960

Traffic circles and rotaries became passe in the 1940s and '50s, when the emphasis was "bigger is faster is better," he said. Reintroduced in the United Kingdom in the 1960s, roundabouts first hit this country in 1990, and today there are more than 800, with more than 300 slated to be built this year alone.

Despite public objection based on being subjected to anything resembling a traffic circle, McCullogh said, "The experimentation process is over. We know what works and what doesn't. ... Public opinion will change."

Despite opposition from some Americans with Disabilities Act advocates, who are promoting the installation of handicapped-accessible crosswalk signals at all roundabouts, McCullogh said the main issue to be resolved in building them is in getting entering traffic to yield.

On the Internet:

<http://dotweb1.dot.state.ny.us/roundabouts/round.html>

www.nearroundabouts.org

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