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TWIN CITIES

Traffic circles take a new spin

BY ALEX FRIEDRICH
Pioneer Press

For decades, much of America has viewed traffic circles with a certain suspicion.

Those odd round intersections — such as the Place Charles de Gaulle in Paris or Piccadilly Circus in London — have bewildered tourists with their hieroglyphic signs and seemingly dangerous onrush of traffic.

They're confusing. They're chaotic. They're ... for Europeans.

But traffic circles — rather, new-and-improved “modern roundabouts” — are making a

comeback. And they may be coming to an intersection near you.

More than a dozen have popped up in Minnesota and Wisconsin in the past few years, and dozens more are in the works. And the current Minnesota Driver's Manual is the first to include directions on how to navigate them.

Maplewood already has two. Woodbury is putting one in. Even little towns such as Mahomet are flirting with the idea.

“Once (state) design guidelines are created,” said Minnesota Department of Transportation project manager Ken

Johnson, “I really think these will take off.”

Traffic planners assure that these won't be your typical beret-wearing, brie-eating, congested Parisian traffic circles. Nor will they be the flawed, older designs found in states back East.

These are simple, one-way, meat-and-potatoes roundabouts free of the problems that make traffic circles on the Continent such a bear. Planners say they have one lane, handle more traffic, lead to fewer accidents and

MODERN ROUNDABOUTS, 5A

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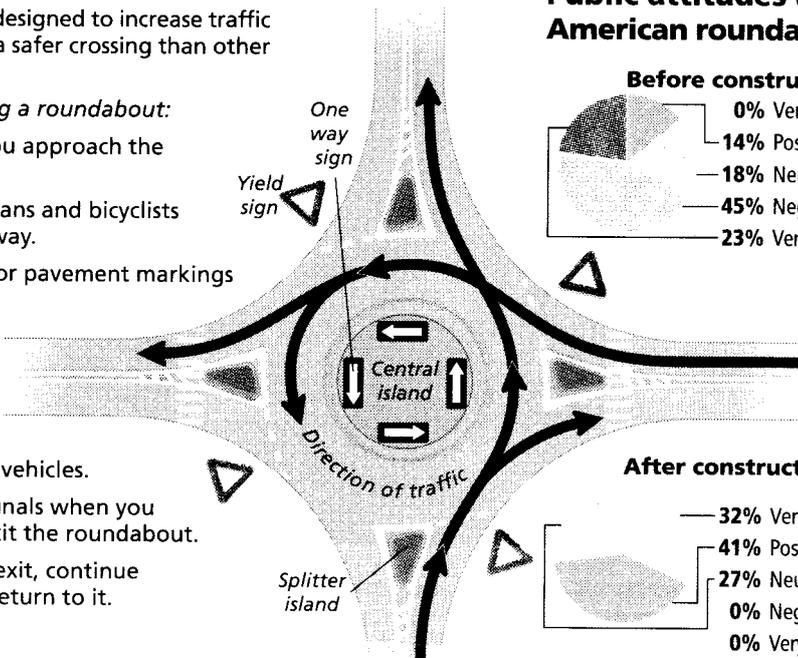
CHRIS POLYDOROFF, PIONEER PRESS

Get used to sights like this. Maplewood's two-year-old roundabout at Frost Avenue and English Street is an example of the type of circular intersection that's becoming increasingly popular in Minnesota and Wisconsin. To navigate it: Wait until it's possible to merge with oncoming traffic, enter the flow, and drive counterclockwise until ready to exit.

Roundabouts are designed to increase traffic flow and provide a safer crossing than other intersections.

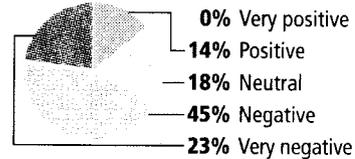
When approaching a roundabout:

- Slow down as you approach the intersection.
- Yield to pedestrians and bicyclists crossing the roadway.
- Watch for signs or pavement markings that require or prohibit certain movements.
- Drive in a counterclockwise direction. Do not stop or pass other vehicles.
- Use your turn signals when you change lanes or exit the roundabout.
- If you miss your exit, continue around until you return to it.

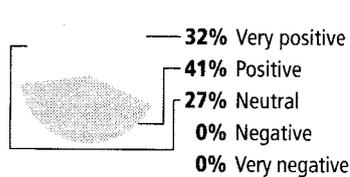


Public attitudes about American roundabouts

Before construction



After construction



Source: Minnesota Driver's Manual, Transportation Research Board

Modern roundabouts

(continued)

are better looking than the average U.S. intersection.

Johnson says not to worry: "It's not the Europeanization of America."

A key to understanding the difference between what's over there and what's coming here is the terminology.

Roundabouts — along with rotaries, their much larger cousins — are actually just one type of traffic circle. Planners differentiate them, because many traffic circles are badly designed.

Also important is a little history, as recounted by Johnson and a report from the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences.

One-way traffic circles as we know them began around 1905 with Columbus Circle in New York City. Other cities, chiefly in the Northeast, followed suit before planners generally gave up in the 1950s.

It seems the darned things just wouldn't work. Among the chief reasons: Cars entering the circle took priority. That forced those already in the circle to constantly stop and yield — a recipe for congestion.

It was the Brits who finally made a breakthrough in the mid-1960s with the modern roundabout.

It reversed the rules — forcing those entering the circle to yield. Parked cars and people — real traffic obstacles — were excluded from inside the circle. And it capped speeds at 15 to 25 mph, which gave people more time to avoid collisions.

Still, it wasn't until the early to mid-1990s that innovators such as Nevada and Colorado gave it a shot again.

Since then, many city traffic engineers — generally a conservative, prove-it-to-me bunch — have slowly warmed up to the idea. So have government officials and even some private developers.

"It turns an intersection into marketing art," said Marc Putman, of Putman Planning and Design, a landscape architect so impressed by roundabouts that he includes them in the communities he designs.

Sure, it seems a little confusing at first. But it's just like making a right turn at a red light. As Johnson said, "The only decision to make is: Is there room for me to merge, or not?"

So far, state transportation officials say, the statistics have been impressive:

- Improved safety. According to a national study, intersections where roundabouts have been built have seen the number of overall collisions drop by as much as 70 percent — and the number of crashes with injuries and deaths plunge by

TRY THEM OUT

Want to take a spin around one of Minnesota's modern roundabouts? Here's where state and city transportation officials say you can find a few:

Maplewood: Frost Avenue and English Street; Kennard Street and Legacy Parkway

Stillwater: Rutherford Road and 72nd Street

Minneapolis: Minnehaha Avenue and Godfrey Parkway

Blaine: 113th Avenue and Davenport Street

Rochester: 23rd Avenue Southeast near Rochester Community College

Medford: Interstate 35 and Steele County Road 12 by Medford Outlet Center

Wonder at the difference between a roundabout and a "traffic circle," which has different design guidelines? Here are a few of the latter:

St. Paul: St. Albans Street and Hague Avenue

Circle Pines: Central and Commercial streets

St. Louis Park: 39th Street West and Natchez Avenue

Farmington: Spruce and 12th streets

as much as 80 percent.

- Smoother traffic flow. Because cars rarely have to stop before entering a roundabout, the average waiting time is 10 to 12 seconds shorter than the wait at an intersection controlled by stoplights.

- Equal or lower cost. At \$400,000 or so, the typical roundabout is pricier than the \$250,000 cost to put stoplights at a typical intersection. But Johnson said all the extra turning lanes, roadwork and operating expenses required for many stoplight-controlled intersections can hit \$500,000 to \$1 million — making roundabouts seem a relative bargain.

Those are benefits that com-

munities such as Maplewood are realizing. Before it installed a roundabout at Frost Avenue and English Street in October 2002, the intersection was the scene of about a half-dozen accidents a year — two of which typically caused serious injuries.

Since then it has had only four minor accidents and no injuries, said Maplewood City Engineer Chuck Ahl. And he claims cars wait 30 to 40 percent less now.

"We're extremely pleased with it," he said.

Getting the residents to go along can be tough, though. Most seem to oppose roundabouts at first, city officials say, even if they can't put their finger on why. But statistics show they eventually embrace them.

Ask Rich Horvath, whose Richard's Market lies just off the Frost and English intersection. He recalled an initial wave of customers who told him, "That's about the dumbest thing (the City Council) could have done."

But after two years, he said, residents seem to have accepted it. In terms of safety, he said, "it has worked very, very well."

Maplewood's roundabout has also caught the attention of Mahtomedi Mayor Judson Marshall, whose town is looking for ways to slow traffic and reduce bottlenecks at Minnesota 244 and Washington County Road 12.

The idea "is pretty slick," he said. "Zip in there, no stop sign, and get out where you want."

But roundabouts don't belong everywhere, planners say. They require more space, and the layout of surrounding buildings and roads may be too restrictive.

And not all drivers are convinced. Motorists in Maplewood say that every once in a while they'll spy someone driving in the wrong direction.

"I think it's awful," said Mary Ellen Cadmus, a 67-year-old retired seamstress from North St. Paul who passes through Frost and English once a month. "It could be dangerous."

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