

Drivers sticking to I-74 detours

By JOHN SHARP

of the Journal Star

Posted Sep 06, 2008 @ 11:59 PM

PEORIA —

A father walking his baby in a stroller darts across Main Street while the traffic light is, for a brief moment, in his favor.

Awnings hanging above the entrance door to an empty building flutter from the breeze as a bus zooms by, less than an arm's length away from the curb of the sidewalk.

Seth Katz, a professor of English at Bradley University and a representative of the Uplands Neighborhood Association, waits for four lanes of traffic — carrying the equivalent number of vehicles each day as the population of East Peoria — to filter through before he can cross Main Street to get to work.

"I call this Main Street roulette," said Katz, a 16-year resident of the Uplands. "I play it two to three times a day."

Juxtapose this scene with that of Interstate 74, to which city officials claim more traffic needs to be routed from the city's inner core, especially from Main Street on the West Bluff.

"Even during rush hours, (I-74) has a lot of capacity on it," Interim City Engineer Nick Stoffer said.

City officials this month will unveil the results of a traffic impact study on and around the Main Street area near its intersection with University. A public meeting is scheduled for Sept. 22, in which the public will learn what will happen with traffic in this area if various things happen, such as the closure of a lane on Main Street.

There is a lot of interest in those results.

"If you put restrictions in (on Main Street) and make it tougher to go that way, that's the kind of thing

that would make people go in a different direction,” Public Works Director David Barber said. “But the one thing you don’t want is to make people take the side streets. It would be a shame to do all the work on Main Street and think (motorists) are going to go on I-74 and then have people take Columbia Terrace instead.”

Getting back on I-74

Numbers released last week to the Journal Star indicate that in several cases, there is less traffic on I-74 since the Upgrade 74 project was completed in 2006.

East of Adams Street, just off the Murray Baker Bridge, the Illinois Department of Transportation counted an average 56,600 vehicles each day in 2008. Comparably, there were 62,100 vehicles daily crossing the Murray Baker Bridge in 2003, around the time the upgrade project began.

West of Adams Street’s exit, the state counted 51,000 vehicles each day in 2008, compared to 59,100 on average each day in 2003.

In East Peoria, west of the Main Street exit, the 2008 count shows 56,800 vehicles daily, down 3,000 vehicles on average each day from 2003, when the count was 59,800.

Eric Therkildsen, a traffic design engineer with IDOT, said several factors could be impacting the declines. Gas prices changing driver habits are one, he said. But another, also expressed by city officials, is that people are still using alternate routes to drive around Peoria two years after the Upgrade 74 project was completed.

“We’re habitual drivers,” Therkildsen said. “You get set on one pattern.”

City officials and neighborhood representatives have taken notice of this and are concerned because traffic is still motoring along at high counts on urban streets where the City Council’s goals are to make them more pedestrian friendly.

“It’s just not that hard to get around anymore, but it is a matter of retraining people,” said Jerry Jackson, a past president of the Uplands Residential Association.

Second District City Councilwoman Barbara Van Auken admittedly is one of those pattern drivers. She said it took her six months after the Upgrade 74 project was completed to comfortably find a route on

the interstate to and from University Street and the West Bluff.

“There is no reason I need to go up Main or Hamilton to get (to Hanssler Place),” Van Auken said. “It’s much quicker and direct to go on the interstate and off Knoxville. ... Of course, I (took the city streets) for six months after I-74 was finished.”

She continued, “I hope I’m atypical. I hope people are finding (the interstate again).”

Tammy Ernst of Sunnyland takes I-74 every work day to Downtown. She used to avoid it during construction and developed a habit of taking the Bob Michel Bridge into Peoria.

“With the construction, I’d avoid I-74 altogether, but it’s now much quicker to take 74 (than the Bob Michel),” she said.

Main Street concerns

If motorists are not finding I-74, then they surely are rumbling down the four lanes of Main Street, those who live and work in the area claim.

Adam White, a co-owner of Running Central at Main Street and Sheridan Road, said it’s time for the city to consider returning Main Street to a more urban road complete with parking and slowed traffic. Traffic counts outside his store exceed that of motorists who drive by Wrigley Field in Chicago on a daily basis.

Katz, the Bradley professor, favors reducing traffic lanes to three and restoring curbside parking.

But some neighborhood representatives are concerned that reducing traffic lanes will only increase the number of vehicles diverted into the neighborhoods.

Already, the congestion on Main and University is causing traffic to route onto the neighborhood streets, some claim.

“There has been a lot of cut-through traffic due to the congestion of the University and Main intersection,” said Beth Hinchee, president of the Uplands Residential Association. “Our neighborhood is bounded by Bradley Park, I-74 and Main and University. When there are back-ups, we see cut through traffic.”

White, however, believes that in time after traffic-lane reductions, motorists will not drive onto neighborhood streets designed for slower traffic.

“If I’m coming from East Peoria and I know I have to navigate residential streets with speed bumps, stop signs and one lane of traffic, I have many other choices as a driver as to where I want to enter a corridor or where not to,” he said. “I think the number of people entering the Main Street grid will reduce proportionately (by reducing lanes).”

State Sen. Dale Risinger, R-Peoria, and a former IDOT engineer, said the city needs to be careful if it decides to reduce lanes.

“I know what they are trying to do, making it pedestrian friendly and at a slower pace because you have Bradley students and want people walking,” Risinger said. “But if you narrow the lanes, you can create bottlenecks and frustrations for everyone.”

Bradley University does not have a position on what should happen with Main Street, a spokesman with the university said last week.

“We’re OK with whatever the neighborhood and the community wants to do with it,” Shelley Epstein said. “We can live with whatever they do as long as there is access to the university.”

Barber said the Sept. 22 meeting will explore the impact of traffic patterns on a number of scenarios. They include: restoring two lane traffic along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, reducing traffic lanes on Main from Farmington Road to University, and widening sidewalks and reducing traffic lanes on Main from University to Downtown.

Said Barber, “It’s not a project to figure out what the final (outcome) is but to look at what the impact is on traffic. The next step is for the council to decide if we should do any more work on Main Street.”

Regional studies

Main Street aside, local transportation officials want to take another look at how traffic is to be distributed throughout the Tri-County Area.

The Tri-County Regional Planning Association is going to buy a travel demand model, the first such model purchased by the organization in 14 years. It is expected to be used within the next year.

Called "Cube," the \$300,000 model paid primarily through a federal grant allows the group to determine where the highest concentration of congestion is and determines traffic patterns by examining where people work, shop and go for entertainment.

The model also allows planners to determine what could happen if, for example, Pioneer Parkway is extended or Northmoor Road is expanded to three or five lanes.

As for I-74, the model can simulate what might happen if impediments are placed on roadways to see if more traffic can be diverted to the interstate, according to Eric Miller, program manager with Tri-County.

Risinger said when it comes to getting more traffic onto I-74, or anywhere else in the Tri-County Area, an origin destination study needs to be done. It's been nearly 15 years since a study determining where interstate traffic is coming from and to has been completed, Risinger said.

David Souk starts his daily drives to Downtown Peoria from the western edges of the city.

He has no problems.

"I've never seen the road congested," said Souk, who leaves for work around 7:45 a.m. "I've never seen traffic (problems) on the highway."

John Sharp can be reached at 686-3282 or jsharp@pjstar.com.