

Monday, April 2, 2007

DOT to spotlight work zone safety this week

Effort aims to inform drivers of danger

By Shannon Rahe
For the Poughkeepsie Journal

Almost every driver has been there - stuck in congested traffic, frustrations rising as the surrounding vehicles progress at a snail's pace. Motorists often find roadwork to be the bane of any commute.

"It's always a hassle," said Karen Wood, a distributor for Westchester Candy whose commute takes her more than 50 minutes a day if there aren't any delays. "I don't want to deal with it. Time is money."

But the inconvenience of driving through highway maintenance and construction zones is nothing compared to the dangers that can arise if drivers don't remain aware.

7 people killed in 2006

In 2006, there were 96 motor vehicle intrusions into New York state Department of Transportation construction and maintenance work zones, resulting in 139 injuries and seven fatalities. Intrusions occur when vehicles enter the closed portion of a marked work zone.

"Driving through a work zone is particularly challenging because of the possibility of unexpected things happening," NYSDOT Regional Director Robert Dennison said.

In order to promote awareness, the Federal Highway Administration has designated this week "National Work Zone Awareness Week."

Designed to increase driver awareness and cut the number of vehicular intrusions into work zones, the week is set as a precursor to the spring highway work season.

"As the construction and maintenance season begins, we all need to be aware that people will be out working on our highways," Dennison said. "It is a time when we all have a responsibility to drive in a careful and considerate manner."

Stormville resident Steve Zoltan agrees the increased caution that will be prompted by the week is a good idea.

"Roadwork is a necessary evil," he said. "People need to learn to slow down and give those guys working a break."

To keep things safe for workers and motorists alike, NYSDOT is trying to improve safety practices within work zones, including conducting highway work at off-peak hours when traffic is at a minimum, and reducing speed limits in work zones.

NYSDOT stresses the importance of motorists using vigilance and responsible driving whenever entering work zones.

"On behalf of the men and women working in construction sites along our roadways, I'd like to remind the driving public to use extra caution when approaching or passing through a work zone," said Ross Pepe, president of the Construction Industry Council of Westchester and the Hudson Valley. "This will help to ensure that these folks get home safely to their families at the end of the workday."

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