

Lack of deal on transportation is a roadblock for road work

Declining funds for projects and inaction at the Capitol will leave many drivers bedeviled by congestion and safety hazards.

By [Laurie Blake](#), Star Tribune

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The three-way junction in Brooklyn Park and Osseo is known as the devil's triangle because of its crashes and congestion, and this summer it was supposed to start getting an overhaul.

But it's not turning out that way.

By failing to agree on new transportation funding this session, legislators and Gov. Tim Pawlenty did not deliver on promises to start work on the dangerous three-way junction of Hwy. 169, Hennepin County Road 81 and 85th Avenue N. The triangle was the scene of 187 crashes from 2002 through 2005, according to the state Transportation Department, and two of its intersections rank third and sixth in the state's 10 worst for crashes.

The delay isn't playing well in the area.

"We were told by the governor and our legislative people that we will get this done," said Gary Brown, director of engineering and building inspections for Brooklyn Park. The construction plans were ready to go, Brown said, and "it's just a shame that politics have to get in the way of peoples' lives."

Although state policymakers largely agree that more must be spent on transportation to ease traffic congestion and improve safety, they disagree year after year about how to do it.

The result this year was the same as in 2005: Legislators passed tax increases on gasoline, vehicles and general sales in the Twin Cities, and Pawlenty vetoed them.

In the DFL-controlled House, an effort Monday to override the veto fell seven votes short of the needed two-thirds majority.

The state's last large infusion of transportation financing was Pawlenty's \$900 million package of highway bonding and accelerated federal aid in 2003, which expires this year. That leaves less revenue than in recent years for highway

construction in Minnesota, despite voters' passage last fall of a transfer of vehicle sales taxes to roads and transit.

As that transfer is phased in, less than \$60 million in new money will be available this year for transportation, about \$35 million of it for roads. When fully implemented in 2011, it will infuse about \$300 million a year. The vetoed bill would have added an additional \$800 million annually.

With the additional funding, the state Department of Transportation (MnDOT) also hoped to accelerate other projects, such as one at the interchange of Hwys. 169 and Interstate Hwy. 494 on the border of Edina, Bloomington and Eden Prairie and another to extend the I-35W carpool-bus lane north of 46th Street to downtown Minneapolis.

The House and Senate led a bipartisan effort to raise the state's gas tax -- frozen at 20 cents a gallon since 1988 -- by 5 cents in September to fund transportation and by another 2½ cents over the next few years to pay debt service on \$1.5 billion in highway bonds.

Pawlenty, a Republican who opposes tax increases, wanted to borrow \$1.7 billion in trunk highway bonds to accelerate about 25 projects and use the vehicle sales tax transfer to pay off the debt.

Both sides included special funding to launch the \$50 million devil's triangle work this summer. Earlier this year, the start had been moved back to 2009 when the Transportation Department took \$35 million from the project to help pay for the Crosstown-I-35W project. The special funding would have gotten the devil's triangle overhaul back on track to start this year.

Traffic trap

The triangle is a traffic trap deluxe. Stoplights on Hwy. 169 and trains that cross the highway delay 70,000 drivers a day, often by 10 minutes or more.

Amy Jermstad of Brooklyn Park often negotiates the tangle. She said she's sorry state leaders did not deliver as promised. "The traffic gets worse all the time," she said. "Just because they can't agree on something ... they are going to make people's drives harder and more dangerous."

Not enacting a transportation funding bill disappointed the governor, said Bob McFarlin, assistant to the commissioner of transportation.

"The governor had a very sound proposal that made progress on transportation in Minnesota," McFarlin said. "The Legislature seems to want to hit the home run

every year as opposed to making incremental progress year by year in a fashion that is more fiscally responsible."

House Transportation Committee Chairman Bernie Lieder, DFL-Crookston, said the incremental approach has put the state years behind. The DFL opposed Pawlenty's borrowing plan because it would have provided nothing for city and county roads, Lieder said.

Raising gas and vehicle registration taxes sends road and bridge revenue to all levels of government, he said. "Every year we don't do something, the costs keep going up. In the meantime the traveling public is paying for congestion and safety problems."