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Malfunction Junction's makeover has begun; travelers can expect slowdowns at night

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LEXINGTON— Late-night travelers might see delays beginning next week around “Malfunction Junction,” as construction to improve the traffic-prone interchange has begun.

Malfunction Junction, the convergence of interstates 20, 26 and 126 in western Columbia, is locally notorious for its heavy traffic and dangerous merges. The area will see major renovations as a part of the S.C. Department of Transportation’s near decade-long Carolina Crossroads project.

Beginning at night on Aug. 8, several lanes will be closed on I-20 eastbound and westbound, and on I-26 westbound, said Brian Klauk, the project manager for the Carolina Crossroads project.

Speed limits may also be reduced at night, but traffic flow should be uninterrupted between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., Klauk said.

“The traffic impact to travelers during the day should not be significantly different than it is today,” Klauk said.

The \$1.7 billion project is split into five phases, and is now in phases one and two, which will prepare the area for more major renovations.

Phase one will connect Interstate 26 to Colonial Life Boulevard, with the intent of saving motorists from the current headache of getting on I-126 to get to Colonial Life Boulevard.

Phase two will allow cars on Broad River Road to make free-flow left turns onto Interstate 20 without opposing traffic.

The start of construction at Malfunction Junction comes while South Carolina schools are still on summer break, and highways are extra congested with beachgoers. Although road work will continue throughout the day, lane closures on the interstates should primarily affect traffic at night, when fewer cars are on the road, Klauk said.

“The public should expect minimal disruptions in these overnight lane closures,” Klauk said. “But there are occasions where there may be a few-minute delay.”

Some drivers, however, are avoiding the area nonetheless.

Latisha Brown, who commutes from Lexington County to her job at a Shell station off I-20 near the planned construction area, said it has always been a nightmare driving through the area.

“I haven’t been over there, lately,” Brown said, citing the unbearable traffic.

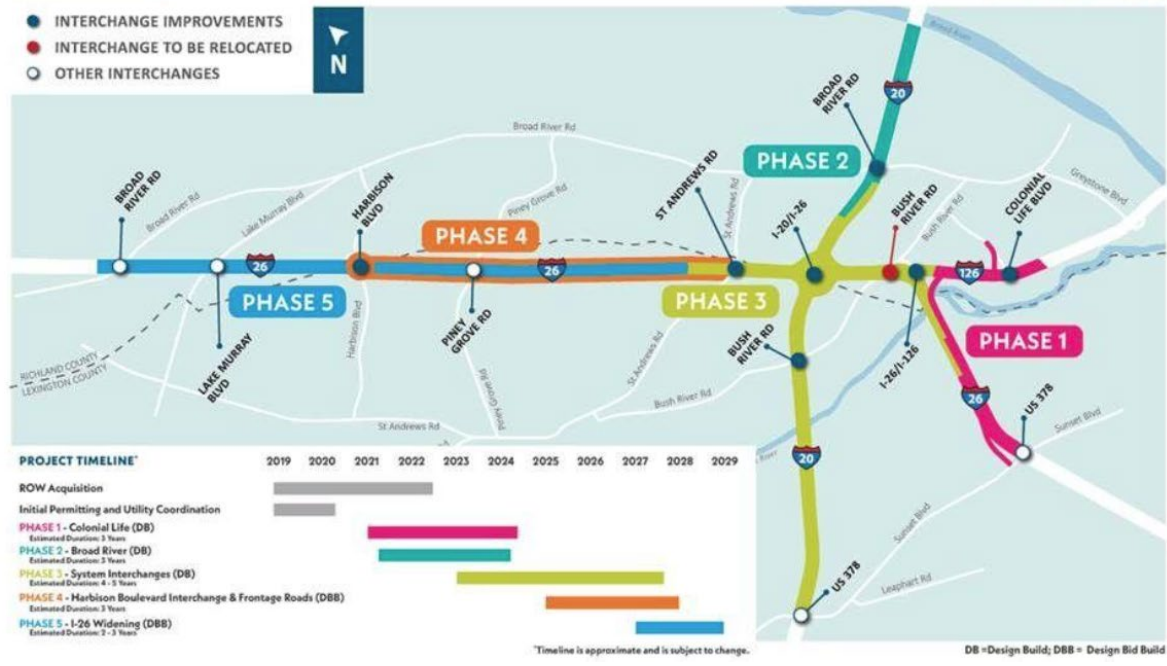
Before construction started, Brown waited more than 20 minutes just to get on the interstate, where she found even more slowdowns. Now that construction has started, it is worth going the long way home and avoiding the risk of more traffic, she said.

The road work at the intersection, however, is not going anywhere soon.

Scheduled to finish in 2029, each of the five phases of work to improve Malfunction Junction will focus on a different issue that causes the backups and accidents.

Phased Construction Map

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The first two phases, to be completed by the end of 2024, are preparing for phase three, which will reconstruct all I-26 and I-20 ramps with more modern designs to make changing interstates easier, and reconstruct exits and entrances on the interstates. Work on phase three will last from 2023 to 2028.

Phases four and five will reconstruct additional I-26 exits, widen I-26 and add a shoulder on I-26. These phases will complete the project by 2029.

Klauk acknowledged the disruption this project will bring to drivers in coming years, but asked for patience from commuters and travelers alike.

“We believe it will be worth it,” Klauk said, adding that after the project is complete, “the average driver will save about 112 hours per year that they would otherwise be spending in traffic.”

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