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Cities going 'round and 'round over roundabouts

There's a lot that you, the Roadguy reader, want to know about public works -- your calls and e-mails prove it. But what's the best way for officials to get transportation information to you?

I tried to tackle that question in a presentation I gave to Minnesota members of the American Public Works Association the week before last. The engineers seemed entertained by my photos of unreadable signs and broken parking meters, and afterward, I had some good conversations about one of the harder pieces of infrastructure to explain: roundabouts.

I got to meet Jupe Hale, a state-approved roundabout designer who works for WSB & Associates, and who has been helping Richfield look for ways to improve roundabout safety. Roundabouts reduce the number of injury crashes, but fender-benders can remain stubbornly high.

The city has tried various kinds of outreach, on the Internet and with printed materials, as well as signs to get drivers to choose the correct lane at two-lane roundabouts. The inside lane is for going straight or left; the

outside lane is for going straight or right. Troubles can arise, Hale says, when left-turners use the outside lane and cross paths with other drivers.

Changing lanes in the roundabout is also not good. When drivers complain that there isn't enough room to do so, Hale's response is: "I know."

Hale said that drivers involved in Richfield crashes tended to be older or did not speak English, but not overwhelmingly so. Because roundabouts are relatively new, those signs with all the wiggles aren't always immediately recognized, while Hale said that signs spelling out the rules could give a driver a lot to read in a short time.

Klayton Eckles, Woodbury's city engineer, says his city is readying an educational campaign that involves pulling over drivers who fail to yield to both lanes of traffic or don't choose the correct lane.

"Some people think they know how to drive the roundabout, and they don't," said Eckles, who nearly got hit by a right-lane left-turner recently. "Those folks are probably going to continue to drive it incorrectly until they get in an accident."

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Back in Richfield, city engineer Kristin Asher said she has gladly taken calls from drivers who need a little clarification. If you have other ideas for getting the message across, let Roadguy know.

Proud of her teen driver

Weighing in on our recent discussion about when teens are ready to get their drivers' licenses is Ann from Maple Grove:

My daughter is 17 1/2 and has been driving since barely age 16 with no accidents. She had a practice permit for a whole year, then we had a Teen Safe Driver camera installed in her car for one year (free through our insurance company) so that we could critique her driving. ... For the first year of driving, she was allowed to go only to nearby suburbs.

She is now one of the most observant and skilled drivers I know. I've seen her avert accidents by moving away from weaving or tailgating cars. Because of a special class she's taking as a high school senior, she must drive to school every day, as well as attend meetings in far-flung places. ... She drives herself to her jobs, music lessons and the dentist. Safety is the major concern, I agree, but once your kid is trustworthy on the road, not having to chauffeur a busy teen is a huge

bonus!

Questions or comments? Contact Jim Foti at 612-673-4491, or at roadguy@startribune.com.