

Commentary...

How to rock the roundabout

By Kim Hapke
Columnist

As the roundabout project comes closer to completion I wanted to say a few words on the project. My motivation stems from an enthusiasm for the project which I have found to be unmatched and also as your resident naturopath, a few words on a public health concern.

First, my enthusiasm, which stems in part from me residing “left” of many of the local shops in town. This left is often executed in the summer as a right turn, then a left, left, left and finally a right again before I can get out of town. The idea that I can now turn right out of some places and boomerang around the roundabout to head home fills me with such a level of joy I am now questioning some of my other life choices.

My enthusiasm has roots, too, in my constant fear of making mistakes. It is nearly impossible to make a mistake in the roundabout. Miss your turn? Unlike in life, the opportunity will be there again. Indeed, I expect to meet my soul-mate this way, by missing my turn, going around again, deciding we have enough milk till tomorrow, thinking I left something important in town, remembering it was my kid, and slowly becoming aware the car in front of me has gone around at least four times, too. A wedding between two such indecisive souls seems

unlikely, but if there was such a thing I would want it to make use of the symbolic meaning of the circle-unity and have the wedding in the center of the roundabout.

Unlike some, my enthusiasm is not dimmed by fear. People have tried to make me fear the roundabout — having me picture trucks stalling and blocking traffic for miles, or envisioning folks incapable of understanding what a roundabout is and sailing through the middle of it. It used to be outside my comprehension that someone could not know what something was when its name is such an apt description of itself. (It’s a circle! And you go around it!) But so many things have been outside my comprehension lately that I am now truly aware of what a finite resource it is.

So, the reason for my lack of fear is not naïve trust in my fellow human, but the simple fact that I have faced something MUCH WORSE. A few years ago the department of transportation in my home state of Minnesota graced the freeway exit a quarter mile from my parents’ house with a two-headed wonder — a double roundabout! Two roundabouts linked together figure-eight style to accommodate two freeway exits, two freeway on-ramps, a frontage road, and two other roads. Just for the hell of it they added a bike lane to the whole thing. If you are wondering why you have never

heard of this it is because Minnesotans are a modest people.

Now Minnesota is not nearly as flat and empty as people who have never been there assume it is, but it still is a place where one can drive long distances and not have to go around anything. So this double roundabout came as quite a shock to most people’s systems. Minnesotans are by nature stoic, so I can tell you that a look on a newbie’s face gave away what a huge leap this feature was to the general population. For those of you who don’t know what expression to put on your face the first time through our roundabout I offer two prompts:

1. You are the captain of a ship entering a mighty storm. You have just watched a ship break up on the reef in front of you. The crew is depending on you. Plus you don’t want them to know you can’t

swim. You take a firmer grip on the wheel and enter the heart of the storm.

2. You have just had a glimpse of something ineffable. It is wonderful, it is terrible. It may be the face of God. Whatever happens, you will be profoundly changed. The car is carrying you deeper into the mystery.

Most of the Minnesotans emerged stronger from this experience, as did I. I did promise a cautionary tale, though, in the interest of public health. There has been only one accident in the double roundabout. A person entered the roundabout, missed their turn and proceeded to rectify their mistake by BACKING UP their car to the missed turn. This is

in direct violation of roundabout protocol and indeed of natural law. And just like when the law of gravity gets flouted, the winner was not the flouter. He was instantly and soundly rear-ended. Not too badly. It’s a roundabout! Things happen slowly there, but just like in life, you can never go back.



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