

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

MnDOT trying to be proactive, not reactive, with proposed RCUT

Twenty-some years ago when MnDOT started installing roundabouts, the public was adamantly opposed to this weird new concept. Fast forward two decades and hundreds of constructed roundabouts, and the public has come to accept this new form of intersection. Some may admit to even liking them.

Later when MnDOT started proposing and installing Reduced Conflict U-Turns, or RCUTs, we saw just as much opposition as decades before with the roundabouts. Not surprising though - it was change, something new.

Last year, when we proposed an RCUT at the intersection of Highway 61 and County Road 9 (Stanley Road) near Two Harbors for construction in 2021, there was again opposition from the general public. We held a public meeting and sent out postcards twice to gauge reactions and concerns. That's when we had to wonder if we needed to do a better job of RCUT education, or this truly isn't the right fit for the proposed area.

The recommendation for an RCUT at Hwy 61 and Stanley Road came after local emergency responders shared a safety concern at the intersection. The angle of the Highway 61 and Stanley Road median makes it difficult to see approaching traffic. A MnDOT consultant studied the intersection and prepared an Intersection Control Evaluation, or ICE, study. MnDOT has had ICE studies prepared on many intersections throughout the district. The study showed the intersection ranked high in terms of risk factors that contribute to fatal and serious injury crashes.

In the past, MnDOT has been criticized for being reactive, rather than proactive when there's

a serious injury or fatal crash. We are working very diligently to change that perception, and this intersection is a perfect example of why we are working to be proactive instead of reactive. Because of the skewed intersection and high speeds, it is an intersection with greater risk and potential for fatal and serious injury crashes. We want to improve that.

Statistically, nearly all of the crashes at this intersection are far side right angle crashes, meaning drivers have crossed the median and then got hit trying to cross the next set of lanes. It is difficult to judge traffic gaps and speeds from that distance. These types of crashes are typically linked to fatal and serious injury crashes. A 2012 Federal Highway Administration study indicates a 70 percent reduction in fatalities at RCUTs and a 42 percent reduction in injury crashes. A 2017 MnDOT study showed crashes are reduced following the construction of an RCUT, including a 100 percent reduction in fatal crashes. Does this mean there won't be crashes at the intersection? Of course not. But they are more likely to be property damage to your vehicle, not a serious or fatal injury where someone was hit at a right angle.

When looking at a map of an RCUT, which can be seen online at <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/d1/projects/hwy61-twoharbors>, it can seem unusual. The way it works is instead of crossing Highway 61 traffic, getting to the intersection and then turning left or going straight across intersection, vehicles will wait for a break in traffic, make a right and merge over to the left lane immediately before making a U-turn in the median and merging with traffic again. It's as simple as a right turn and then a left turn. A graphic and map showing turning movements are on the website, along with videos

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showing vehicles making the turning movements. This RCUT is designed to handle firetrucks, semi-trucks and other large vehicles.

MnDOT will be hosting a virtual public meeting this summer to discuss the proposed intersection improvements. Due to COVID-19, we are unable to host in-person meetings at this time, but we feel this is an important topic we want to keep discussing even during this time.

An RCUT isn't the only portion of the proposed project. This project includes pavement resurfacing on Highway 61 from Knife River to just south of the Scenic Drive (Old Hwy 61). Please visit <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/d1/projects/hwy61-twoharbors> for more information on the project, more education and videos on RCUTs and future info on the public meeting.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!

Minnesota Wins National Award for Helping Veterans Access Education Benefits

March 9, 2020

St. Paul, MN – The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs presented the Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award to the Minnesota's Veterans Application Tracking System (VATS), a joint project between the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT). VATS transformed the way Veterans in Minnesota apply for and receive education benefits through the Minnesota GI Bill. Since July 2019, 2,600 Veterans have successfully used VATS.

On February 24, MDVA Commissioner Larry Herke accepted the award on behalf of the state from VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. The Pillar of Excellence Award recognizes outstanding programs that support Veterans.

"Receiving the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Abraham Pillar of Excellence Award is a great honor," said Governor Tim Walz. "Those who raise their hand to serve our country exhibit extraordinary courage, discipline, and sacrifice, and they deserve the best from their state and nation when they return home. I am proud of our state's work to make Minnesota a leader in taking care of our Veterans."

MDVA ensures that Veterans have access to

the range of earned benefits, including education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Through the Minnesota GI Bill, Veterans along with eligible spouses and children, have access to a maximum benefit of \$10,000 to use for higher education, on-the-job training or apprenticeship programs, or to reimburse fees for licenses, certification or college admission exams.

"The VATS-Education module is an amazing example of how technology can be utilized to create better outcomes for Minnesotans, especially for our Veterans," said Minnesota IT Services Commissioner Tarek Tomes. "Veterans are not only entitled to these education benefits, they are entitled to be able to access those benefits in the most efficient way possible."

"MDVA understands the importance of the educational benefits granted by the Minnesota GI Bill in improving our Veteran's lives, and therefore the health of our community," states MDVA Commissioner Herke. "We are committed to informing Veterans of the many possibilities available to them."

To better access earned education benefits, MNIT and MDVA developed the application tracking system. VATS streamlines the application process then shares and manages

Veterans' needs with stakeholders on Minnesota's institutes of higher learning.

"Applying for the Minnesota GI Bill through the Veterans Application Tracking System has allowed me to not only pay for classes and books but also allows me to reduce how much I had to take out in student loans, which will not only benefit me while I'm in school but far into the future," said Veteran Raymond Camper.

Veterans submit applications online while accessing a single database that houses information for all Minnesota education programs and services. With consolidated electronic case notes, a formerly weeks-long application process for reimbursement of tuition can be completed within a single day. VATS was developed with flexibility in mind, so the system can easily accommodate changes like adding a new benefit type, business policy or process, or making modifications to comply with legislative mandates.

VATS replaced multiple manual, paper-based processes, and an existing 15+ year old application that was expensive and difficult to support. With VATS-Education in place, there are now automated workflows for approvals, appeals and denials, and MDVA staff can access the system to make decisions on benefits from wherever they may be.

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