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Freeway of love? Few gripes over I-295 bottlenecks

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This weekend, Interstate 295 commuters will find out what happens when you mix freeway construction with 100,000 festival-goers all converging on a town near the heart of the work zone.

From Friday through Sunday, July 15 to July 17, the Yarmouth Clam Festival will draw an estimated 100,000 visitors to Yarmouth over the festival's three-day run. Typically, without a major festival, over 50,000 vehicles per day travel I-295 near the Yarmouth-Freeport town line, the Maine Department of Transportation estimates — and that same section is now part of a swath of I-295 northbound that's being repaved and retrofitted with guardrails and drainage.



Traffic navigates north on Interstate 295 at Portland Tuesday. (DAVID CARKHUFF PHOTO)

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MaineDOT official: 'This year we've tried to make it a lot more predictable'

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Mark Primeau, director of the Yarmouth Clam Festival, which raises money for Yarmouth's nonprofit organizations, school groups and churches, said there's no effort to ward people away from I-295. Rather, it would just cause more confusion to try to direct visitors to detours, he said. And, anyway, road construction is a given in any Maine summer, he reasoned.

"I don't think it's any different than it is any year between May and September because that's the paving season," Primeau said.

The reaction of the public to ongothis is one of the busiest areas of the state and it's certainly an area that sees a lot of tourist traffic," said Meg Lane, communications project manager with Maine DOT.

"Thankfully it appears the public is cooperating and planning ahead, we can't deny that there are delays and inconveniences. ... (But) compared to some other projects, we haven't been swamped with emails and phone calls," Lane said.

This job, priced at nearly \$24 million in the Greater Portland area, involves "rehabilitation" of Tukeys Bridge. That means crews are removing the top layer and the deck down to the support beams and rebuilding the bridge surface.

MaineDOT officials warned motorists this week that shifting travel lanes and temporary on- and off-ramp

ing construction zones on the heavily traveled I-295 seems equally ho-hum and equanimous. Even as peak travel times bring bottlenecks, and traffic stalls especially in the area of Tukeys Bridge, where 85,000 vehicles can collect on any given day, it seems to be business as usual for motorists.

"We get more complaints about all the work that's going on in the city," said Jan Beitzer, Portland Downtown District executive director.

The state's efforts to educate about the road work on the freeway appear to be paying off.

"We designed a pretty extensive outreach campaign because we know

"The feedback that we have had is more, 'Hey, how long is this going on?' 'Where can I look at a map that has alternate routes?'" she said.

Through speed zones and one-lane corridors, freeway users aren't seeing many abrupt changes in their path of travel, Lane said.

"The engineering staff has done a very good job of designing traffic patterns that work better, this year we've tried to make it a lot more predictable than it was last year, especially folks moving northbound on Tukeys Bridge don't have a lot of decision points," Lane said.

The freeway job consists of several separate contracts, including repair of Tukeys Bridge northbound, a \$3.1 million job by CPM Constructors that is expected to last from mid-May to October; I-295 southbound bridge

closures in the work zone will require drivers to pay attention and plan ahead for making exits.

Crews will be shifting the closed lane on Tukeys Bridge southbound to the center lane, affecting drivers who want to take the Exit 9 offramp. As a safety precaution, the contractor will install fixed, centerline delineators which will split I-295 into two separate lanes starting about one mile before the bridge.

Similar freeway work last year seemed to have a more dramatic impact on traffic. Indeed, there were three motor vehicle crashes in the span of a week last summer on I-295 southbound.

Beitzer said the freeway construction this year hasn't ruffled too many feathers, based on feedback to her office.

"When they shut it down last year and they reopened it, we got a ton of calls, but we haven't this year," Beitzer said.

Further proof: A Facebook page from 2009 called "I Hate I-295 (Maine)" has gone dormant, leaving little sense of dissatisfaction in the commuting public.

Lane said Maine DOT tries to use social media to explain changes in the work schedule.

"We use Facebook for certain updates since we know that there are things like the closure of the Washington Avenue exit or decisions that will impact a lot of people, we put it on our Facebook page," Lane said.

improvements by Lane Construction Corp., a \$12.5 million job that also extends into the fall; and I-295 north of Portland, an \$8.3 million job by Pike Industries, which includes nighttime paving and bridge repair work as far as Brunswick.

Meanwhile, night work is set to begin on I-295's Franklin Street, Preble Street and Forest Avenue overpasses, Maine DOT warned this week.

When night work is under way, the following ramps will close from 7 p.m. until 6 a.m. and detours established: I-295 southbound on-ramp from Franklin Street (detour left onto Marginal Way, right onto Forest Avenue, and right onto the I-295 southbound on-ramp); Exit 6A (Forest Avenue) off-ramp from I-295 southbound (detour to Exit 6B, turn right onto Forest Avenue, right onto Baxter Boulevard, left onto Preble Street, and left onto Forest Avenue); and the I-295 southbound on-ramp from Forest Avenue outbound (detour right on Baxter Boulevard, left on Preble Street, left onto Forest Avenue, and right onto the I-295 southbound on-ramp).

Lane said Maine DOT urges drivers to slow down and pay attention and avoid peak traffic times.

"We certainly said from the very beginning, the only way the project could succeed was with the help of motorists," she noted.

For details on the freeway work, visit www.maine.gov/mdot/i295portland.