

MATT HELMS: On Paul Street, little bridge needs big fixes

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The Disaster of the Week is a small road that packs a lot of punch.

NAME: Paul Street bridge.

LOCATION: Over the Southfield Freeway on the Dearborn-Detroit border, between Ford Road and West Warren.

WHY IT MATTERS: Paul isn't the busiest bridge over a freeway. In fact it's one of probably thousands like it, which makes it representative of its peers. In my travels, I've noticed that some of the worst roads in towns are small stretches of bridges and on- and off-ramps near our major freeways.

West of the Southfield, Paul runs through Detroit neighborhoods of modest bungalows. East of the freeway, it runs near shopping centers including Fairlane North. It's not as busy as some of the major roads that cross the Southfield in this part of town, but there was a fair amount of afternoon rush hour traffic using this bridge Wednesday -- albeit slowly and carefully.

HOW BAD IS IT? Pathetic. Its concrete sidewalks are crumbling. On the driving surface, you can see year after year of patch, kind of like how the rings in a tree's trunk tell you its age. The older patch is a light gray, while the newer stuff is pitch black, including some that looked fresh Wednesday.

"It's so bad I think some of the holes have holes in them," writes David Feinbloom of Franklin, one of several readers who nominated Paul.

"You can see the steel showing through the bridge, and all the patching of the potholes make for a very bumpy and car-shaking ride -- not to mention, it is an eyesore," writes Robert Engle of Detroit, another of Paul's big fans.

All of the drivers I saw on Paul seemed to know to slow down as they approached the bridge, indicating it's been bad enough for so long that no one is caught by surprise anymore.

HELP IN STORE? Not until spring 2006.

The Michigan Department of Transportation says Paul will be completely rebuilt starting then -- part of a larger project that also will see the bridges at Warren and Tireman rebuilt.

The new Paul will also be taller -- it's now below 14 feet but will be taller than that when rebuilt. That ought to be a big help, because since 1961, Paul has been hit at least 25 times by big trucks yet remained safe for motorists.

"That bridge is a true indication of the redundancy we place into our bridges" to make sure they're durable,

says MDOT spokesman Rob Morosi.

It's like a fighter that takes a beating but won't go down -- until big heavy machinery comes to replace it.

NOMINATE YOUR FAVORITE DISASTER: Let us know the road you love to hate.

Drinkers beware

St. Patrick's Day is all about beer -- green beer.

So here's a warning: 27 police agencies will be out looking for drunken drivers Thursday in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, along with 37 other agencies statewide.

The Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning, which is funding the extra patrols, says nearly a third of all traffic fatalities nationwide occurring around St. Patrick's Day in 2003 were the result of drivers with blood-alcohol levels of 0.08 percent or more. That is the limit at which a driver in Michigan can be charged with drunken driving.

Meanwhile, a group of doctors advocating against drunken driving urges people to take heed because all that green beer has made the holiday so dangerous on the roads.

The group, called End Needless Deaths on our Roadways, says only the New Year's and Fourth of July holidays have more alcohol-related crash fatalities. The group urges doctors and other health-care providers to offer more screening, brief interventions and appropriate treatment for people who abuse alcohol, even if only occasionally.

Don't leave it to the luck of the Irish. Pick a designated driver and don't let people behind the wheel if they've been drinking.

Weekend construction

I-94 will be closed in downtown Detroit from 8 tonight to 5 a.m. Monday so crews can tear down part of the ramp connecting westbound I-96 to westbound I-94.

The eastbound I-94 closure begins at I-96, while the westbound I-94 closure starts at the Lodge Freeway. Crews also will close the I-75 and M-10 ramps to westbound I-94.

The detours: Eastbound I-94 traffic will follow eastbound I-96 to northbound I-75 back to I-94. Westbound I-94 drivers will take the southbound Lodge to southbound I-75, then northbound Southfield Road back to westbound I-94.

Want to avoid the detours? Try using 8 Mile or I-696 to the southbound Lodge or I-75 into the downtown area.

Contact **MATT HELMS** at driving@freepress.com -- e-mail is best -- or leave a message at 313-222-1450. Be sure to include your full name, the city where you live and day and evening phone numbers for verification.

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