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## M-59 gridlock drives traffic talk in Macomb

### Officials see no quick cure to the curse of the Hall crawl

By Doug Henze



Photo by LARRY PEPLIN Drivers inch their way along Hall Road. The amount of traffic is both a blessing and a curse for merchants along the corridor that some call Hell Road.

Slogging through stop-and-go traffic on northern Macomb County's main east-west thoroughfare — four lanes deep in exhaust and exhaustion — it's easy to understand why some locals have dubbed it "Hell Road."

For the business district along the stretch of M-59 officially known as Hall Road, that gridlock has become both blessing and curse. The area has seen a major development push in recent decades, but the traffic backups can also be a deterrent to visitors.

"I refer to M-59 as Macomb County's Golden Corridor," said Joe Sowerby, president of commercial real estate brokerage **Anton, Sowerby & Associates** in Mount Clemens. "Everybody wants to be on M-59. That traffic is the lifeblood of businesses in the busy commercial district."

Borrowing a line made famous by Yogi Berra, parts of M-59 have become so crowded "nobody goes there anymore."

#### Development continues on east edge of Hall corridor

The Macomb County portion of the M-59 corridor extends all the way from Dequindre Road to just east of I-94, with the bulk of the development and congestion concentrated between Van Dyke Avenue and Romeo Plank Road. Communities along that stretch include Utica, Sterling Heights and Shelby, Macomb and Clinton townships.

While much of the Hall Road corridor is fully developed, areas on the eastern

"There have been a number of restaurants that have come and gone" on Hall Road, Sowerby said. "Some of that is because of the intense competition, and some of that is because if you want to go out for a casual dinner, not everyone wants to fight the traffic. M-59 is optional if you're going out (to eat).

"It's the yin and yang of being on a powerful corridor. Merchants don't like the traffic, but they love the people."

The average daily traffic count on M-59 near M-53 — the busiest section of the road, according to the **Michigan Department of Transportation** — is 102,700 vehicles. While that falls short of the 128,300 vehicles that travel I-696, about nine miles due south, M-59 offers many more entrance and exit points than its controlled-access cousin. And that means one thing: slow traffic.

In terms of moving traffic smoothly, sometimes Hall Road works and sometimes it doesn't, said Robert Hoepfner, director of the **Macomb County Department of Roads**.

"It probably carries more traffic at rush hour than it was designed for," said Hoepfner, whose agency does not have authority over the state road. "I would prefer not to travel it on rush hour. If you're not in rush hour, it's a great road."

The most sluggish section seems to be from Garfield Road to just east of Romeo Plank Road, Hoepfner said.

"The cause of this, in my opinion, (is) there are a lot of traffic signals there," he said. "When you build large traffic generators, this is what you get."

Solutions are limited, since there's little room for widening, he said.

### **Road improvements? Get in line**

MDOT, which does traffic light timing studies every couple of years, recognizes the issues and is readying to take a stab at improving traffic flow. But businesses and drivers are in for a wait before they get any major relief.

While road crews have been patching pavement since the beginning of April, the next major reconstruction project in the congested corridor won't begin until 2017.

That's when MDOT expects to begin a \$30 million effort to rebuild the two-mile stretch of Hall from Delco Boulevard, just east of M-53, to Hayes Road in both directions. MDOT expects to finish the design phase of the project, which will begin in June, in December 2016.

It's too early to determine whether rebuilding that part of the road, which is four lanes in each direction, will take one or two years, said Colin Forbes, the MDOT projects and contracts administration engineer who oversees work in that section of Macomb County. When it's done, it should improve traffic flow, he said.

"Reconstruction is going to help with mobility," Forbes said. "We're going to look at pretty much everything. If we can improve right turn lanes, median lanes — we're going to look at all of that."

MDOT decided to tackle that stretch of Hall as part of its regular evaluation of roads it maintains. The agency determined patchwork fixes would no longer be cost-effective.

"Every year, we review our road conditions, countywide and regionwide," Forbes said. "The road is showing some significant deterioration over the last five years. There comes a point when it doesn't make sense to spend significant dollars on repairs."

The reconstruction of Hall from M-53 to Hayes could lead into a future phase of road improvement, but MDOT hasn't made any definite plans, Forbes said. That \$36 million phase would involve the two-mile stretch from Hayes to Romeo Plank.

"We're going to be reviewing the need to increase capacity," Forbes said of the span, which carries 60,000 vehicles a day.

At Garfield Road, headed east, Hall decreases from four lanes to three. MDOT is considering adding a fourth lane there.

The agency also would look at improving traffic signal timing.

edge are still filling in.

For example, development continues at **Chesterfield Corners**, a shopping center north of Hall and east of Gratiot Avenue. Kicking off in 2001 with construction of **Wal-Mart**, the development now includes **Menards**, **Bob Evans**, **Hampton Inn**, **Holiday Inn** and other businesses.

Colin Forbes, the **Michigan Department of Transportation** projects and contracts administration engineer who oversees work in that section of Macomb County, recalls that just a few decades ago Hall Road was mostly farmland.

"It's just amazing, the last 25 years, how it has built up," he said.

MDOT will design the expansion at the same time as the M-53 to Hayes project, Forbes said. But the second project will have to overcome several hurdles — including completion of an environmental impact assessment and getting input from business owners who would be affected by a major reconstruction project.

The project's biggest challenge, though, will be MDOT's ability to secure funds. With a crumbling infrastructure and a Tuesday ballot measure to increase road funding uncertain to get voter approval, the state is in a cash crunch.

"Hayes to Romeo Plank is not in our five-year plan now," Forbes said.

### Alternate routes?

In the near term, MDOT is focusing on its night and weekend pavement repair program, which is expected to end in mid-July. Crews are working on both sides of Hall between Elizabeth Road and I-94.

MDOT is conducting the work from Friday evenings to 5 a.m. on Mondays to minimize the impact on traffic, Forbes said. Because the section of road is east of Hall's restaurant district, business owners are less impacted by construction, he said.

Bottom line, there is no easy way to make a major fix to gridlock, said Mike Labadie, a transportation engineer and group manager in the Farmington Hills office of **Fleis and VandenBrink**. The Grand Rapids-based company is a consultant for MDOT, township government, developers and others.

Creating a northern I-696, a below-ground freeway using service drives to reach businesses, would be prohibitively expensive, he said.

"(And) think of the impact on the businesses that rely on passerby traffic," he said.

Other solutions could be to create limited-access lanes near the median for express traffic or to create higher-capacity, alternate routes north or south of M-59.

With limited funds and serious road safety problems, though, the state's first priority won't be improving traffic flow, he said.

"When you've got bridges falling down, maybe you better fix those first," he said.

### A mature market

The corridor has been taxed by decades of population growth, and the resulting development boom of the 1990s and early 2000s. The county's population increased from about 788,000 in 2000 to an estimated 860,000 in 2014 — a 9.1 percent increase, according to U.S. Census figures.

Sowerby, the broker, has helped move that growth along.

In the past year, he has done three major deals on Hall:

- **Crest Automotive Group's** sale of its dealership between Groesbeck Highway and Gratiot Avenue to **Causley Automotive Group LLC**, which now operates **Causley Hyundai Mazda**.
- Scottsdale, Ariz.-based **Stonegate Properties'** sale of 6.5 acres of land between Card Road and Elizabeth Road in Clinton Township to **All Pro Motors LLC**, of New Jersey, for the planned **All Pro Nissan** dealership.
- Sale of the closed **Stu Evans Lincoln Mercury** dealership near Romeo Plank in Clinton Township to Scottsdale, Ariz.-based **Spirit Capital LLC**. The site now is home to an **LA Fitness** gym.

Because the M-59 corridor is largely mature, much of the development going forward will be repurposing tired properties.

"What you're seeing now is what I just did with LA Fitness," Sowerby said. "You don't see any big bang going on, but you see a lot of stuff getting recreated."

Only about three or four large parcels remain undeveloped in the corridor — including a 9.2-acre site east of the Causley dealership. Sowerby has the site listed. That means further development isn't likely to ratchet up the gridlock much more, Sowerby said.

"The good news is, I don't think the traffic is going to get any worse."



Photo by LARRY PEPLIN The average daily traffic count on M-59 near M-53 — the busiest section of the road — is 102,700 vehicles. Further complicating traffic: There are many exit and entrance points.

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