


Challenges and opportunities emerge with opening of new Interstate 40 in Oklahoma City

Motorists driving the eastbound lanes of the new I-40 are getting a new view of downtown.

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A great big traffic jam surprised morning commuters Friday when the eastbound lanes of the new Interstate 40 opened just south of downtown.

Sure, traffic lights malfunctioning at the Western Avenue exit created some chaos, but delays were inevitable anyway thanks to travelers, including myself, who took the “long way” into downtown that morning.

After more than a dozen years of planning and construction, plenty of residents were curious to see what all the fuss was about. And to those who observe downtown closely, the road is seen as a potential game changer.

As with any major change, this project has its ups and downs. One downside, feared from the moment the route was chosen, is that it severely cuts access to downtown. The old eastbound I-40 had exits at Western, Walker and Harvey avenues that funneled directly into the central business district.

The new highway has only two exits for eastbound travelers into downtown: at Western Avenue, with a 10-block drive into the central business district, or at Shields/E.K. Gaylord Boulevard with a five-block, direct drive into the central business district.

An \$80 million boulevard set to replace the current highway is designed to ensure travelers eventually will enjoy the same direct access they enjoy now into downtown. Engineers working with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation say they believe they can get the current crumbling highway torn down, and the new boulevard designed and built in two years.

In the meantime, however, eastbound travelers have quite the detour into downtown, and destinations including the Oklahoma City National Memorial, Bricktown and the Oklahoma City Museum of Art have the challenge of ensuring interstate drivers still manage to leave the highway to include these tourism spots to their travel plans.

The impact of these travelers cannot be underestimated. Over the weekend, Bricktown

was flooded with Kansas State football fans traveling home after the Cotton Bowl in Dallas.

The other question remaining is what sort of impression will the new highway make on travelers passing through Oklahoma City? They will certainly appreciate not driving on a patched up bridge that looks as if it has almost collapsed several times over.

The design of the roadway, bridges and retaining wall is almost complimentary to the city, though it also loses much of the dramatic skyline view that was provided by the former alignment. But when the eastbound lanes are at ground level, the earliest views are of the Oklahoma River. It's a good view — one that presents the river in its best light.

Suddenly, almost unbelievably to even locals, it appears as if Oklahoma City is a “river city.” The river fades from view during the middle stretch of the ride, but then has a grand finale as travelers are treated to a full presentation of the emerging boathouse row, most notably the Chesapeake Finish-Line Tower.

What's lost on this drive are the up-close views of the Chesapeake Energy Arena and most of Bricktown.

Some of those traveling the new alignment also worried about the unsightly views. Littered backyards of homes in the Riverside neighborhood between Walker and Shartel avenues will be screened by an ornate rock-style wall designed to fit in with the depressed sections of the new highway.

The Producer's Cooperative Oil Mill dominates the view of the skyline even more than the 50-story Devon Energy Center and does nothing to lessen fears expressed by civic boosters, including Lee Allen Smith, that the property sends the wrong message about the city to thousands of motorists passing through the city on I-40 every day.

The property was once considered a candidate for the new \$250 million convention center approved as part of MAPS 3, but with a broker listing the property for sale for \$121 million, a committee tasked with site selection went with the old Fred Jones Ford dealership just south of the Myriad Gardens. Don't be surprised if those who wanted the convention center located at the oil mill will be even more adamant that the wrong site was chosen.

In hindsight, one also might wish the wonderful mural painted on the OKC Rocks rock climbing gym — the old grain elevator south of Bricktown — had been extended to the south facade facing the new road.

Offsetting such new negative impressions are the Skydance pedestrian bridge spanning the new highway, and a greatly improved view of the Land Run Memorial sculptures along the southern segment of the Bricktown Canal — and, of course, the river.

More challenges and opportunities wait to be realized as the westbound lanes of the new

highway open this spring.



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