

Roundabout takes shape



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Work continues on the roundabout in front of Depot Park at the intersection of Pacific Avenue and Center Street. Some drivers already are experiencing the new traffic measure while construction wraps up.

First of city's two planned traffic circles set to be finished in May

By SHANNA MCCORD

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SANTA CRUZ — Bumper-to-bumper traffic common near Main Beach and the Municipal Wharf should ease up by summer after the city completes a roundabout in front of the busy Depot Park intersec-

tion — the gateway to the city's beaches and recreation spots.

Construction began last week on the long-planned circular intersection at Pacific Avenue and Center Street to allow vehicles to ease in and out without necessarily making complete stops.

The intersection has been excavated to

build a center circle and stop signs have been yanked out and replaced with yield signs.

The roundabout — planned since 2005 at a cost just under \$1 million — is expected to be completed the first week of May, said

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Work on the roundabout is funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

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ROUNDABOUT

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Josh Spangrud, an associate civil engineer with the Santa Cruz Public Works Department.

The work is being done by Don Chapin Co. of Salinas, and funding is largely from federal stimulus money awarded to "shovel ready" projects in 2009.

Public Works officials say drivers are already using the intersection as a roundabout during construction, and it's functioning better than it did before construction started.

However, there are some rules of the road that make navigating the new configuration easier and safer.

The No. 1 traffic rule for mastering a roundabout is drivers to yield to cars

already in the circle, Spangrud said. Once there is a safe clearing, drivers can enter the circle, he said.

For pedestrians, the trick is using the designated crosswalk, which will be set back from the intersection. The crosswalk is currently marked with tape on the street.

"The main problems we have observed are people who try and cross from one corner to the other corner, effectively stopping all traffic in the intersection as they saunter down the middle of the lane," Spangrud said. "It's set up so drivers deal with pedestrians first, then the cars. We don't want pedestrians crossing through the middle of the roundabout."

City officials debated between overhauling the intersection with a signal light or roundabout. The roundabout won for its traffic efficiency, safety and reduction in air pollution, Spangrud said.

"We did studies that show we needed to do something," Spangrud said. "The studies show roundabouts have shorter delays, shorter line of cars waiting, fewer accidents and produce less air pollution because you're not just sitting idling in your car."

The city also wants to build a roundabout at the intersection in front of the Municipal Wharf. However, that project has been stalled because of lack of cooperation from Union Pacific, which owns the rail line that cuts through a corner of the intersection.

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission is in escrow for purchasing the rail line. When the sale is complete, work on the roundabout should move quickly, Spangrud said.

The city is preparing a pamphlet to introduce drivers to features of the roundabout.