

Commentary Lost for eternity on roundabouts

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

I spent an intimidating period during my younger life dodging danger in the large city of Washington, D.C. But it wasn't the muggers who scared me or the insane drivers or the presence of admitted politicians.

It was the roundabouts. Those circular intersections were unnerving to a newcomer. So I was not sorry to leave them behind when I returned to the less frantic streets here in Lewiston. But now this small city is building a roundabout. And I trust we will survive the great honor of experiencing an enhancement we don't especially need.

Mind you, I have nothing against the theoretical idea of a roundabout. After all, I lived to tell about navigating such a thing. But there is a definite learning curve to find your way safely into and out of that traffic gimmick.

Wikipedia describes a roundabout as "a type of circular intersection or junction in which road traffic is slowed and flows almost continuously in one direction around a central island to several exits onto the various intersecting roads."

Driving roundabouts with many exits is an art form that involves following the circular pattern and then taking the one exit that carries you onto the street you want to travel. But finding the right exit was the worrisome part in Washington, D.C. When I first started driving there I was told that the secret, if you were a roundabout virgin, was to stay on the circle, driving around and around until you had a sure fix on the street you wanted to take.

Then and only then, should you risk exiting.

That was because, if you panicked and took the wrong exit, it was a mile-and-a-half trip finding your way back to the circle and trying again.

I probably overlearned the lesson because, at first, I would go around in that circle for several minutes until it was a lead-pipe cinch I could spot the correct exit on the fly. Only then did I dare escape and go on my way.

I spent so much time in roundabouts I started seeing familiar faces behind the wheel of other cars. They were rookie Washington drivers like me, not willing to take a wild chance on exiting without being absolutely certain they were correct. There are probably people on those industrial strength D.C. roundabouts who are like the doomed sailors on the Flying Dutchman, that ghost ship that sails the sea forever.

I think there are drivers in Washington roundabouts who have been stuck in that dizzy creation of heartless highway engineers since before World War II. Those drivers grow old and gray and never return home.

And now, the very city in which I have lived free of fear for years is exposing us to that hell on our wheels, the roundabout. I hope I haven't lost my touch after finally learning to maneuver through the rounded intersections of our nation's capital.

Mind you, I do not doubt that the roundabout will work here in this valley of 50,000 innocents. People have learned to cope in most cities that have adopted this traffic trick. Most people not only get the hang of the roundabout after a few weeks or years, but they gradually come to prefer roundabouts to stop lights.

However, a friend who once lived here after spending most of his life in large cities, used to call our end-of-work-day vehicle traffic "the Lewiston rush minute." The congestion is little more than that today. Roundabouts in a community of 50,000 souls is overkill - something like building a 40-story skyscraper here. And the Lewiston rush minute remains something that is hardly a heartache so great it justifies the enormous price of a roundabout.

Even if it works and pleases people after a couple of years, the money could be better spent on the new library or on buying every citizen of this valley unlimited Idaho potatoes for the rest of their days.

But no. The engineers want to save us from our naive ignorance of what's good for us. And it's not like we don't have potholes aching for repair and in need of money for that purpose. But city hall has spoken. We have our driving orders.

So I'll see you on the circular road that goes around and around, just another lost driver covered with cobwebs sailing the cursed curves of the Flying Dutchman Roundabout.

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