

Road Sleuth

Myths & Facts Revealed



This photo shows a single lane roundabout in a rural location in the state of Washington. (Special thanks to Skagit County, WA and the Washington LTAP for providing this photo.)

the right-of-way. As traffic volumes increased, traffic circles became unsafe because the congestion and high speeds attributed to many crashes. Thus, the need for a safer circular intersection became apparent; the first modern roundabout in the United States was constructed in the 1990s.

Roundabouts are intersections in which traffic travels in one direction around a circular island, much like a traffic circle, but they have many distinct characteristics. Motorists in roundabouts travel at lower speeds, from 15 to 25 mph, and the traffic inside the roundabout has the right-of-way. Motorists attempting to enter the roundabout must yield to circulating traffic and look for gaps to enter.

Many citizens have negative opinions of roundabouts and are opposed to constructing them in their community. These negative opinions may, in part, be due to the common misconception that traffic circles and roundabouts are the same. Additionally, inexperience with driving through roundabouts, safety concerns, and a lack of information often lead to resistance and negative opinions.

Studies have found that roundabouts are often a safer alternative to signed and signalized intersections. Since automobiles are traveling at low speeds, crashes that do occur are generally less severe. All vehicles are traveling in the same direction, which eliminates the likelihood of head-on and t-bone collisions. In addition to the safety benefits of roundabouts, they often move traffic more efficiently. When designed properly, vehicles are much less likely to stop and delays are reduced.

Myth: Roundabouts and traffic circles are the same thing.

Many people mistakenly use the terms roundabout and traffic circle synonymously. While both direct traffic in a circular pattern, they are not the same.

Traffic circles were introduced to the United States from Europe in the early 1900s. They were intended to direct traffic via a large circular or oval island. Traffic circles were designed for vehicles to travel through them at relatively high speeds (30 to 50 mph), and many were designed for entering cars to have