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Roundabout in doubt for Orchard Lake Road

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A boulevard and no roundabout — that's the latest plan under consideration for Orchard Lake Road.

"We think (a four-lane boulevard) is the best option," West Bloomfield Township Supervisor Michele Economou Ureste said. "It's what the residents and the business community want."

And the Road Commission for Oakland County has agreed to study the viability of a four-lane boulevard between 14 Mile and Maple roads. The commission and township officials have been at odds for months over the project. A series of talks brought a compromise that includes building a traditional intersection at Maple and Orchard Lake roads instead of a roundabout if it is eligible for federal funding.

If the four-lane boulevard is a go, the township will pay up to \$400,000 of the preliminary engineering costs.

In the meantime, the RCOC will put a 3-inch asphalt overlay on Orchard Lake Road. That should extend the road's life for five more years.

The township will pay 50 percent, up to \$750,000, of the overlay project using Tri-Party funds. The project will be started and completed sometime this year.

Original plans for Orchard Lake Road called for turning it into a six-lane boulevard. But last fall, the RCOC said the \$43 million project was short \$18 million and opted to rebuild the road the way it is.

However, a group of West Bloomfield officials and residents formed and has been meeting with the RCOC in hopes of transforming it into a four-lane boulevard for safety reasons.

"Boulevards are generally safer and they increase traffic flow because you're eliminating movement in the left turn lane," township resident and committee member Richard Barr said. "Traffic counts are down so a six-lane boulevard is no longer necessary."

Constructing a roundabout at the Orchard Lake and Maple road intersection has also been a point of contention between the RCOC and the township. Opponents said they were dangerous to drivers and pedestrians and they do not represent a downtown.

RCOC spokesman Craig Bryson said the three roundabouts that have already been built in the township have improved traffic flow and "significantly" decrease the number of accidents.

"They're doing what they're supposed to do," Bryson said. "There was a learning curve but people are getting used to them and things are going smoothly."

There are roundabouts at the intersections of Maple and Farmington Road, Maple and Drake and Farmington and 14 Mile.

Bryson estimates there is an average of one minor non-injury accident at each roundabout every week. Additionally, the travel reduction time has also decreased between five and 15 minutes.

Although there is no time line in place for the boulevard project, the RCOC still hopes to have Orchard Lake Road completed by 2011.

The roundabouts and the Orchard Lake Road improvements are part of the often-controversial Northwestern Connector project. It's intended to improve traffic flow where Northwestern ends at Orchard Lake Road.
