

TRANSPORTATION

Going 'Round in Circles May Be Just What U.S. Traffic Needs

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U.S. drivers have an uneasy relationship with roundabouts, but that hasn't stopped transportation planners from ramping up the installation of the circular intersections across the country.

The growing use of roundabouts in the U.S. to speed the flow of vehicles couldn't have come too soon, says the Economist, a United Kingdom-based newsweekly whose home country sports some 10,000 traffic circles. The newest roundabouts are more efficient and safer than their predecessors, the Economist says. Modern designs have mechanisms for slowing down traffic as it approaches the roundabout. They also don't allow pedestrians to walk into the middle of the circle, a common feature of older roundabouts such as Manhattan's Columbus Circle.

Precise statistics aren't available, but according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, there are about 1,000 modern-style roundabouts in the U.S. Some 150 to 250 circles are being added every year. In Washington state, there are now more than 100, the state transportation department says, up from 17 in 2001. But the U.S. still sharply trails more roundabout-friendly nations; Australia has 15,000, while France has 20,000.

Good things come from roundabouts, the Economist says. They eliminate the need for traffic lights, which are costly to build and maintain. When traffic is light, cars don't need to stop, reducing fuel use and pollution. And despite many drivers' skepticism, roundabouts cut down on accidents, mainly by doing away with potentially dangerous left turns at intersections. A 2001 study by the Insurance Institute found that roundabouts have 80% fewer crashes with injuries than ordinary intersections. That is a potentially substantial reduction, since 45% of all automobile collisions in the U.S. occur at intersections.