Doing the traffic loop-de-loop
Costs may doom bypass route to North Atherton

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To Penn State professor David Burrows, who’s well-acquainted with standstill traffic for blocks on Park Avenue, the benefit of an additional passage to North Atherton Street seems "self-evident."

And to Penn State doctoral candidate and Toftrees resident Jon Reinhardt, who’s seen traffic between work and home increase year after year, a new artery between the university and North Atherton "should make that area much more accessible and stop all the congestion."

Such commuter-level views look kindly on an idea called the Eastern Inner Loop, a long-envisioned road that would let commuters skirt the eastern side of State College to get to northern North Atherton Street.

But with the $30 million to $45 million cost of such a bypass thought to be out of reach, this chapter of local government planning seems to be coming to a close with no exit yet in sight.

Elliot Abrams, Patton Township supervisor, thinks the Eastern Inner Loop planning will be canceled, even though he continues to support the idea. With College Township and State College opposed, and with no money in view, "it seems like an exercise in futility," Abrams said Monday.

Tom Daubert, State College Borough Council president and Centre Region Council of Governments chairman, will urge the COG executive committee today to put the
cancellation question to a vote at next Monday's meeting of the full COG -- all 32 elected officials from the six municipalities around Penn State.

The alternative would be to have the municipalities -- Ferguson, Halfmoon and Harris townships in addition to State College and College and Patton townships -- come to conclusions as individual units first. Daubert calls this option needless.

"There's no reason to send it back to the municipalities," he said, "since I think everyone has discussed it and knows what they want to do."

In the most recent plan, the loop would extend University Drive at Park Avenue to connect with North Atherton at Vairo Boulevard, with most of the construction on university-owned land in College Township. The road would pass through Penn State's 395-acre arboretum, for which the first tree was dedicated last month. One reason it would be so expensive is that the area's ups and downs would have to be leveled.

Jack Jenkins, College Township Council chairman, said he doesn't want to see a big road go through the arboretum, even if Penn State has refused to commit itself in opposition to the loop, which could threaten the university's Big Hollow well fields.

"It's too costly, it's an environmental hazard, and we should be thinking of alternatives," Jenkins said.

Penn State officials could not be reached for comment Monday. But Centre Region planning officials have said the university does not oppose a road through the arboretum. The university has commuter parking fields near University Drive, which could account for an ambivalent attitude.

Less expensive alternatives to the loop present their own problems. Widening Park Avenue would get commuters to North Atherton Street faster but would do little to thin the congestion afterward, and the Atherton Street congestion is the heart of the matter.
A Fox Hollow Road interchange with the Mount Nittany Expressway would have to overcome state Department of Transportation objections and could face opposition from residents of The Village at Penn State, a university-affiliated retirement community.

One way to get commuters to North Atherton Street faster is the three-year-old Interstate 99 on-ramp at Park Avenue. But many commuters seem to prefer old and slow North Atherton to the new and complicated interchange between Beaver Stadium and Innovation Park.

"That is a horrible messy intersection there -- you'd think it was a Los Angeles interchange," Daubert said. "If you're going west, I can see why you don't want to go that way."

Those who do go that way to Toftrees, Overlook Heights, Park Forest Village or dozens of apartment complexes on both sides of North Atherton find a bottleneck at the Waddle Road off-ramp, where so much traffic stacks up that the light has been set with an unusually long green so exiting cars don't back up onto the expressway itself.

"Something has to be done as soon as some money shows up," Abrams said.

Daubert's response to commuters stuck on Park Avenue rests on finding a way for them "to get out" and onto the expressway that isn't "too much out of their way."

To Abrams, finding another way out of town also means finding another way in, a concept that's in keeping with borough efforts to keep downtown State College alive.

"The idea of reactivating the downtown," Abrams said, "depends on access from outlying areas."

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