

Engineers prepare for impact of Blatnik Bridge closure

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Traffic backs up along Belknap Street in Superior around 4 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 19.

Jed Carlson / Duluth Media Group



By [Shelley Nelson](#)

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SUPERIOR — Traffic engineers are looking at ways to mitigate traffic when the [Blatnik Bridge](#) closes for reconstruction.

And over the next year or two, they'll refine a plan to keep traffic moving between Duluth and Superior.

“We’re going to obviously rebuild and have a new bridge design for 100-year life,” Pat Huston, project manager with the Minnesota Department of Transportation, told the Metropolitan Interstate Council on Sept. 18. Huston said the project is on track to award the contract to build the bridge by June 2026.

The Blatnik Bridge has traditionally carried the most traffic moving between Duluth and Superior. The Blatnik carried up to 35,000 vehicles per day crossing over the St. Louis Bay in 2019, while only 18,000-20,000 traveled over the St. Louis River along the Bong Bridge.

“Superior will bear, not the whole brunt, but a large brunt of the diversion issues,” said Jeff Knudson, a traffic engineer working to find solutions.

Knudson said some of the traffic expected to be diverted to the Bong Bridge when reconstruction begins has already shifted because of the Twin Ports Interchange Project.

In 2018, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation undertook a study to look at what happens in Superior when the Blatnik Bridge is closed.

“Obviously, the traffic goes way up because Belknap (Street), Highway 2 is going to be the main detour route,” Knudson said. “There was also a lot of diversion identified on other east-west routes, Winter Street, 21st, 28th. That study touched on the capacity of the east-west system. There is capacity on the east-west system, but it really requires traffic to use all of the system. They need to use some of these other routes.”

Routes in Duluth expected to see a higher volume of traffic include Highland Street and 46th, 48th and Grand avenues.

“Early this year, we did a series of traffic counts to kind of confirm what’s going on right now,” Knudson said. “And we definitely confirmed that right now there’s already a fairly significant diversion just from the work that’s going on in Duluth on the Twin Ports interchange and 53 and I-35 connections.”

While the Blatnik Bridge has historically had 30,000-35,000 vehicles per day, the most recent count was about 20,000 vehicles per day, he said.

“We’ve already seen, at least in Superior and parts of Duluth, we’ve already seen some of that congestion tick up just from a partial diversion,” Knudson said.

One of the main issues in downtown Superior is the proximity of traffic signals between Banks Avenue and Ogden Avenue, Knudson said. He said once traffic is east of Ogden Avenue, the capacity goes up because the spacing increases between traffic signals.



Traffic is backed up on Tower Avenue in Superior around 4 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 19.
Jed Carlson / Duluth Media Group

“Right in this Banks to Ogden area, I think most of you probably know it jams up pretty good today,” Knudson said. “Our recommendation, based on traffic modeling, is that there is some restrictions needed ... at a minimum, we believe some left-turn treatments at Banks and Ogden need to be restricted. Meaning we need to ban some left turns at Banks and Ogden.”

He said that would give that time to move traffic on Belknap and provide additional space for the main movement of left turns on Tower Avenue.

“I find it now to go south on Tower is near impossible,” when traveling westbound on Belknap Street, said Nick Baker, co-chairman of the Metropolitan Interstate Council. “The cars are backed up two blocks ... If you want to turn left onto Tower Avenue, it’s getting ridiculous.”

Knudson said the goal of left-turn restrictions is to make turning at Tower Avenue better, but it will send more traffic to Tower Avenue. He said signal optimization and traffic that diverts to other east-west routes in Superior will be essential to avoid jamming up downtown Superior.

“One of the big ideas is to really promote Winter Street, Susquehanna Avenue (to the north) as the alternate route to going through town,” Knudson said. “What I would really like to see is more traffic that’s coming into Superior eastbound, instead of going through the downtown signal system, take a right at the roundabout ... as a dedicated alternate route.”

Superior Councilor Mark Johnson said he had concerns about increasing traffic in the Billings Park residential neighborhood.

“Nobody wants to promote Billings Park as a cut-through,” Knudson said. “We just know that people love the least effort to get where they’re going. We have a fairly strong sense that Garfield, Elmira, Missouri and Susquehanna are going to get more traffic, but none of those are going to be promoted as an alternate route.”

The Minnesota and Wisconsin transportation departments are hosting a public meeting at 5 p.m. Oct. 15 at the Superior Public Library, 1530 Tower Ave., to give an update on the project.

By Shelley Nelson

Shelley Nelson is a reporter with the Duluth Media Group since 1997, and has covered Superior and Douglas County communities and government for the Duluth News Tribune from 1999 to 2006, and the Superior Telegram since 2006. Contact her at 715-395-5022 or snelson@superiortelegam.com.

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Glad to know that this is being given some thought... Belknap traffic is already pretty bonkers at times; will only get worse when the Blatnik closes.