

DOTD studying road use

Traffic builds along with industrial jobs on La. 30

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GEISMAR — After-work drinks in hand and the evening sun fading, George Richards and his buddies shot the breeze in a corner of the Chevron gas station parking lot at La. 30 and La. 73 in Ascension Parish.

Standing under the roof of an idled cinder-block car wash, Richards and three other pipe fitters working at one of the plants undergoing an expansion in Ascension Parish watched the afternoon rush-hour traffic clear out Wednesday.

The men got off work at about 4:15 p.m. but did not expect to leave the gas station parking lot until after 6 p.m.

“Why would you want to sit in the 45-minute, bumper-to-bumper (traffic) rather than sitting here and drinking a cold beverage?” asked Richards, 57, who lives in Clinton.

Equal parts time-conscious practicality and convenient justification to hang with the boys, Richards’ reasoning garnered little disagreement from his friends or, by the looks of things, others who were also waiting around the Chevron Wednesday evening.

Some workers, business people and area officials said traffic on La. 30 in Ascension is locking up worse than ever in the

afternoon and early morning hours as workers head to and from the expanding industrial corridor in Ascension.

“It is a serious problem. There is no question in my mind about that,” said Mike Eades, CEO and president of the Ascension Economic Development Corp.

Eades said plant officials tell him the backups are a hindrance in getting workers to and from the plants and raise safety worries for getting people out and emergency responders in during a major incident.

The La. 30 stretch, which runs near the Mississippi River, is home to large industrial facilities owned by Shell, BASF, Occidental, Honeywell, PCS Nitrogen and other companies.

The bulk of Ascension’s 5,433 manufacturing jobs are there, but the area has few ways in and out: River Road, Interstate 10, La. 73 and La. 30.

“I can tell you that every company out there that we interview, that’s a major complaint that we get,” Eades said of La. 30 congestion.

Funneling workers in and out of Ascension’s decades-old plant zone is hardly a new worry, but what has added to the concern, officials said, has been the recent growth in the corridor, including a series of expansions and major new plants. Numerous small services companies have also continued to sprout.

Parish officials said last summer the expansions would bring a five-year spike in sales tax collections and a wave of construction workers who would add to the road demands.

Also, one of the key outlets, the I-10/La. 30 interchange, is a growing retail hub for Gonzales with a Home Depot, Cabela’s, a series of hotels, restaurants and Tanger Outlet Mall. Nearby Lamar-Dixon Expo Center, which became a parish-owned multi-use

complex in 2009, also occasionally adds to the traffic mix with major events. Add it all up, some say, and you get the current traffic woes.

“That’s a mess in there, trying to get out,” said Autry LaCoste, 49, of Plattenville, as he pumped gas near I-10 before his ride home to Assumption Parish.

LaCoste said he works as a welding inspector at Repcon Inc., an industrial service company, just down La. 30 from I-10.

On Wednesday at 4:30 p.m., eastbound traffic on La. 30 was backed up to a near standstill from I-10 to the main BASF entrance on La. 30, almost 2.5 miles east. Westbound La. 30 traffic began backing up just west of the BASF entrance past a sharp bend in La. 30 near the Air Products plant and from there bumper-to-bumper traffic stretched to La. 73, almost one mile.

La. 73 northbound was slowed to a standstill from Cornerview Road nearly a mile north to La. 74. Traffic was also slowed on La. 3115 and Ashland Road, which feeds workers into La. 30.

The state Department of Transportation and Development this month began a yearlong feasibility study of La. 30. DOTD will look at the section of the highway between La. 44 and Ashland Road to improve traffic flow and prepare for future growth, said Dustin Annison, DOTD spokesman.

“The study will look at improvements that can be made at intersections along the corridor as well as improvements to the corridor itself,” Annison said.

Several ideas have been proposed to alleviate La. 30 congestion, the primary one being widening two- and three-lane La. 30 to four and five lanes.

Ascension Parish President Tommy Martinez reiterated his wish

Friday that La. 30 should be widened from Gonzales to Baton Rouge.

"Whenever the study comes back, the traffic problem is still going to be a traffic problem," he said.

Tom Yura, BASF general manager in Geismar, said the traffic issues are being managed with help from law enforcement and others.

"The public safety folks are doing everything they can, but at some point, we've got to have a bigger road," he said.

One of the corridors for the much-maligned Baton Rouge Loop proposes adding two lanes. Drivers would pay tolls to fund the expansion.

Mike Bruce, lead Loop consultant and a senior principal with Stantec Consulting Services, said that section would easily cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

The Loop project is still working through the regulatory process, waiting on review of the environmental impact statement by the U.S. Department of Transportation and other federal agencies.

If DOT issues a record of decision, project backers can begin seeking funding either publicly or through private backers for segments of the toll road, Bruce said.

Facing outcry several years ago, Ascension officials, including Martinez, pronounced the southern Loop dead, in part because the traffic numbers were not there to make the toll project attractive for a private partner. Loop officials do plan to start with a northern wing of the \$4.5 billion ring highway.

But Bruce said La. 30 had less traffic on it when the Loop was initially proposed and the Loop can be built in sections.

"You can break it up in any piece that makes logical sense," he said.

Ascension officials also point to other projects that remain on paper but could mitigate traffic on La. 30.

Martinez is seeking federal grant funding for a connector between South St. Landry Avenue and La. 44, just south of the I-10/Burnside interchange. The \$10 million to \$15 million road is being pitched as another outlet for Lamar-Dixon, but Martinez has also proposed another phase that would tie South St. Landry to Ashland, a major outlet for workers leaving the plants.

Combined, Martinez said, the two phases would give plant workers another way to reach I-10.

Gonzales Mayor Barney Arceneaux said the city shares interest in widening La. 30 to four lanes. But the city also has proposed three roundabouts around the I-10/La. 30 interchange to get traffic moving more smoothly.

Estimated at \$7.5 million to \$10 million, the project was to be bid out for construction in early 2016 but Annison said the new La. 30 study will put that project on hold.

Arceneaux said that, though studies by the city and by Tanger have examined improvements to that area, he agreed to the third study after businesses, including Tanger and trucking companies, raised concerns with roundabouts.

He said DOTD Secretary Sherri LeBas said the study would be an independent look and promised DOTD would go forward with roundabouts if they are what the study recommends.

"I think we all want the same thing," Arceneaux said. "It's just what kind of plan we have to move the traffic."

Back at the Chevron at La. 30 and La. 73, scaffolding workers Jeff Sanders, 24, and Tremaine Washington, 24, both of

Assumption Parish, watched Wednesday evening as traffic passed on La. 73 after making a northbound turn from La. 30.

They liked the idea of four lanes.

“Four lanes would be real good. Awesome,” Washington said.