

Paseo del Pueblo project planned to ease traffic

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It's no secret to Taosenos that traffic downtown on Paseo del Pueblo Sur is the subject of nightmares, especially when trying to turn left in the midst of congested traffic. But after nearly 20 years of waiting, Taosenos may finally get to see some traffic relief.

The road, officially named State Road 68, has been the subject of a traffic study by the state Department of Transportation that has taken several years, yet no construction has resulted and traffic remains congested in the narrow streets of the downtown area during certain times of the day.

One such issue is the intersection of Paseo del Pueblo Sur at Los Pandos Road and Siler Road, which has a traffic light complete with a green turn arrow that doesn't work. DOT officials said this will be resolved in a major upcoming road construction project set to begin in 2018.

"The traffic on the main drag is always a nightmare," said Taos visitor Marilyn Brown. "When you're getting ready to come in or go out on the main road there [Paseo del Pueblo], it's a nightmare. So if you don't want to come through town, a bypass would be wonderful."

Several obstacles stand in the way of a massive construction project on the highway, such as restrictions on historic areas of downtown.

"The historic district is a big consideration. We want to make sure we take that hugely under consideration," said Antonio Jaramillo, DOT project development engineer. "[We will] follow all regulations and ensure that historic properties are protected."



Traffic being backed up from Kit Carson Road to past Ojitos Road is a normal occurrence in downtown Taos. Studies have been conducted to relieve some of the traffic congestion in the town.

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The volume of traffic has already caused backups and congestion in the area and, according to the DOT's 2016 traffic study, the issue could get worse with a surge in traffic volume if the issues aren't fixed. Many of the challenges on Paseo del Pueblo Sur identified in the state's study include traffic lights, pedestrian safety and the presence of a historic district in the middle of the project. Historic districts often pose a concern for road construction projects, especially with the tight space near Bent Street on Paseo del Pueblo.

The 2016 DOT report builds on two prior Taos road studies dating back to 2001. The earlier studies looked at possible bypass routes and current traffic conditions and rated stoplights on their efficiency. There were several meetings about projects to ease traffic congestion after the reports, but problems in the downtown still weren't resolved.

According to a 2004 traffic study, nearly 12,700 vehicles traveled through the downtown area of Paseo del Pueblo Sur near the Plaza every day. The 2016 DOT study of the area states that number could increase to between 15,000 and 26,600 vehicles within a 20-year time frame.

DOT officials have said they will look at addressing the issue not just with redesigning the roads, but also with stoplights and pedestrian walkways. Sidewalks downtown are, in some places, crumbling and too narrow to walk shoulder to shoulder while others pass by. Jaramillo said during an interview that the sidewalks, which have seen considerable aging over the years, will be redone to better accommodate for pedestrian traffic along the highway in the historic areas.

In looking at five key intersections on the highway, DOT was at one point considering roundabouts for some of the traffic woes. Roundabouts have been used in some areas around town, such as along Paseo del Cañon, and have proven to be an efficient way to move traffic.

"Roundabouts significantly reduce traffic fatalities," said town of Taos senior planner John Miller. "They are a little confusing to people who haven't used them a lot, but that's typically the preference for new intersections."

According to Miller, the town was considering a roundabout on Siler Road and Los Pandos Road near Smith's grocery store, but the state said a revamp of the intersection will not include a roundabout. DOT officials have confirmed that the intersection will be redesigned and will include a left-hand turn arrow for northbound traffic.

"We are realigning Los Pandos," Jaramillo said. "We're looking at acquiring the property that is on the northeast corner and realigning Los Pandos to intersect Slier Road, making it a T-intersection. You're going to have a regular intersection."

The \$11 million project, which includes 1.8 miles of Paseo del Pueblo Sur, is in its design phase and is scheduled to begin late in the summer of 2018. During construction, DOT will try to keep traffic moving through the already congested area as well as possible, according to state officials. At this time, officials did not have an estimated completion date for the project.