

Roundabouts at 87th & I-435 Now Open

by Seann McAnally
• JC Advocate

Roundabouts at 87th St. and I-435 near Bannister Mall are open, and local community leaders say that's good for business.

Lou Austin, a south Kansas City lawyer who chairs the 3-Trails Community Improvement District, said he remembers the first plan for an improved interchange at 87th St. and I-435.

"It looked like a bowl of spaghetti, and it had a price tag of \$4 million," he said.

At the time, Chuck Eddy was on the Kansas City Council. He and his fellow councilman Alvin Brooks wanted to make 87th St. improvements part of a bond issue that was coming before voters. Dean Machinery had just located nearby, and big things were expected on land owned by Specialty Restaurants, which is now being developed by the Stowers Institute. The city needed 87th St. to be widened to four lanes to accommodate those developments. But the plan they had, according to Austin, was a "deal-breaker."

According to city documents, the Missouri Department of Transportation said they wouldn't get involved with the original plan, because signals at outer roads and highway on-ramps were too close together.

Then one day, MoDOT traffic engineer Steve Hamadi walked into Austin's office

with a sketch of a couple of circles.

"I wanted to make sure he wasn't just doodling," Austin said, smiling. "He showed up at my desk with a drawing of roundabouts and said, 'what do you think of this?'"

Austin and Hamadi put their heads together and went to then-councilman Eddy.

"The city at the time was rolling out this big \$250 million capital improvements bond issue," Austin explained. "Eddy and Brooks wanted the roundabouts in that bond funding. But they had to have a price tag."

Together with Specialty Restaurants and local landowner Mike Purcell, the 3-Trails CID hired an engineer to design the roundabouts. And not just any engineer, but one who specializes in roundabouts — Michael Walwork of Fort Orange, Fla.

"There are only two roundabout designs that are accepted by the Federal Highway Commission, and one of them was designed by Walwork," Austin said.

Once the designs were complete, and construction costs of some \$5.8 million were ascertained, Eddy and Brooks moved forward with a public hearing.

"We had about 40 or 50 people attend and they all liked it," Austin said.

Endorsements from the Southern Communities

Coalition and the South Kansas City Chamber of Commerce followed.

The improvements included widening 87th Street to four lanes to Newton Road, lowering the grade of the 87th St. so that larger trucks could go under the highway, and a 10-foot-wide multi-use path for pedestrians. The roundabouts are also wide enough to accommodate large trucks — not all are.

Austin said roundabouts don't always work for all locations, but that they're a perfect fit for the Bannister area.

"Look at this," he said, pointing at a map showing vacant parcels all around the roundabout. "You can reach all of this land now from 360 degrees. What these have done is open this area up wide for development."

That kind of "fluid traffic" is vital, he said. He said most residents have had the frustration of not being able to access a business 50 feet away across an intersection because of medians, turn-only lanes, and so on. Roundabouts eliminate that, he said.

"Consumers say, 'we will go to places if it's easy to get there,' and so if you can increase access, you increase developable land area."

He said roundabouts are also safer, and referred to MoDOT studies that show decreased accidents by almost 60% in roundabouts

compared to traditional intersections, and that those crashes that do occur tend to be less severe.

Of course, Austin said, he realizes not everyone is sold on roundabouts.

"There are some that don't work well, primarily because they were not well-designed. It's also important not to get them mixed up with traffic circles like the one at Ward Parkway and Paseo Blvd."

He said a roundabout is distinguished by the fact that no one has to stop on their way through an intersection, and that traffic within the circle has the right-of-way, no matter what.

"The public has the right to be skeptical," he said. "But roundabouts can improve efficiency, safety and spur economic development. If done right, they're extraordinary."

Austin said as the roundabouts take off, it's important to remember how they got here.

"We were lucky that Eddy and Brooks were visionary, and looking outside the box," he said. "We also had open-minded local business leaders who were willing to have the discussion."

It won't fix all of the Bannister area's challenges, Austin said, but it's a start.

"It's just a little piece of a much bigger situation," he said.

