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# New exit off I-91 north in Hartford to Charter Oak Bridge will eliminate one of Connecticut's worst highway bottlenecks.

FEEDBACK

By **KENNETH R. GOSSELIN**  
HARTFORD COURANT | MAY 20, 2021



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Workers finish concrete on the side of the new ramp off I-91 to the Charter Oak Bridge and I-84 East. The new ramp will open to the first travelers shortly after midnight on Wednesday. (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

## FEEDBACK

**HARTFORD** — The first of two lanes on a new, left-hand exit will open shortly after midnight to commuters, leisure travelers and operators of 18-wheelers. The ramp -- including a 900-foot section of bridge -- is the centerpiece of a \$240 million state transportation highway project, the largest in three decades in the Hartford area.

The new exit 29 will replace an ill-conceived, right-hand exit nearby with the same name where traffic routinely backs up for a mile or more. The DOT estimates that 67,000 vehicles pass through the area each day.

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“There’s been a longstanding problem with traffic on I-91 northbound, mostly driven by that ramp,” Mark Rolfe, deputy DOT commissioner, said. “You have a single-lane ramp, very steep and all it takes is one truck going a little slowly, and it’s causing congestion and backups.”

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# Relief For Infuriating Highway Bottleneck In Hartford

A new exit off I-91 northbound in Hartford to the Charter Oak Bridge and I-84 east will open May 26 just after midnight in a \$240 million state Department of Transportation project aimed at eliminating one of Connecticut's most notorious highway bottlenecks. The map shows how the new exit 29, including a 900-foot section of bridge, will connect to the Charter Oak Bridge. The existing exit 29, at right, will be closed simultaneously and dismantled.



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“The biggest thing is that it will keep the traffic flowing, that back up here is awful,” Juan Ruiz, a DOT project engineer, said this week during a tour of the new ramp. “People don’t want to stay in line. They want to cut in front of everybody, and they slam on their brakes. I’ve seen it too many times from the bridge and guess what happens? Bam!”

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Workers heat, pound, shovel and cart hot asphalt to form a plug joint on the new ramp off I-91 to the Charter Oak Bridge and I-84 East. The work is putting the finishing touches on the new exit, which took a little over two years to build. (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

FEEDBACK

Between Jan. 1, 2018 and April 30 -- the latest statistics available -- there were 372 crashes with 85 injuries, according to the DOT.

The new exit also will place travelers in the lanes to connect with I-84 east. The old ramp forced drivers to weave across lanes on the Charter Oak Bridge to make that connection.

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The DOT already has started to prepare drivers for the opening of the new ramp with electronic messages on I-91 in Wethersfield. Ceremonies marking the opening are planned for Tuesday morning.



Traffic can back-up for a mile or more at any time during the week and on weekends before the existing exit to the Charter Oak Bridge in Hartford. A typical back-up is shown in this 2019 file photo. (Sean Patrick Fowler / Special to the Courant)

The bottleneck around the Charter Oak Bridge is not only infamous locally, but has drawn national attention. More than once, the area landed on an annual list of the 100 worst bottlenecks in the country for truck freight and seen as an impediment to economic growth in the state.

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“The other benefits go to quality of life,” traffic, they are not home with their families, they are not watching their kids’ soccer games.”

The new exit is part of a \$240 million project that stretches 3.5-miles from Wethersfield north to East Hartford that is scheduled for completion in the fall of 2022. The project went into design in 2015 under former Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and began construction in 2019.

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An 18-wheeler passes under the new ramp off I-91 to the Charter Oak Bridge and I-84 East. The new ramp includes a 900-foot section of bridge shown here from below. (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

A second lane on the new exit ramp is expected to open next year when widening projects in East Hartford are completed, including two bridges. The widening is needed to accommodate the traffic from the new exit that merges with motorists on Routes 5 and 15.

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Charter Oak Bridge. The financing inclu  
another \$45 million in federal dollars.

Rolfe said the DOT sees the traffic problems at the Charter Oak Bridge as among the top five or six worst ones in the state. Some congestion “choke points” around the state -- the 1-91/I-95 interchange and Q Bridge in New Haven and I-84 in Waterbury -- have already been tackled, and more are on the way, Rolfe said.

FEEDBACK

DOT workers walk the new ramp off I-91 to the Charter Oak Bridge and I-84 east during a tour for the Courant. (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

“Our budget simply doesn’t allow us to add, say, a lane through an entire corridor - - 95 between New York and New Haven -- it’s simply not in the cards,” Rolfe said. “We’re looking at more of these targeted, strategic investments where we can open up some of these choke points.”

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divisions -- including how I-91 cuts the cost of highway construction in the 1960s and 1970s.

In Meriden, Rolfe said he expects the first in a series of improvements to begin next year to address backups at the I-91/691 interchange.

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An expansion joint marks two sections of the new ramp off I-91 to the Charter Oak Bridge and I-84 east. (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

The state also is watching closely how the debate over President Joe Biden's infrastructure proposal is unfolding and is working with the state's Congressional delegation.

"At this point, there's a great deal of unknown about it," Rolfe said. "But yeah, if there is significantly more federal dollars coming our way then we can start to look

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# News @3 Newsletter

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Proponents of mass transit and other forms of getting around say that for highway improvement projects to succeed long-term, however, there needs to be fewer cars and other transportation options.

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Specific tags are attached to the safety vests of DOT workers on the new ramp off I-91 to the Charter Oak Bridge. (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

In Hartford, the backups on I-91 northbound have existed ever since the new, wider Charter Oak Bridge opened in 1991.

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Connecticut is sluggish, but these six industries are adding jobs

New exit off I-91 north in Hartford to Charter Oak Bridge will eliminate one of Connecticut's worst highway bottlenecks.

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congestion closer to downtown Hartford on the Founders and Bulkeley bridges caused by drivers trying to make the same connection.

But a new bottleneck was created almost from the beginning with one-lane exit from I-91. Ruiz said the exit close simultaneously with the opening of the new ramp and it will soon be dismantled.

“That’s 30 years we’ve had to live with this,” Donald L. Ward, district manager at the DOT, said, “and now, on May 26, we’ll be done with it.”

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FEEDBACK

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Ken Gosselin covers real estate and financial services for The Courant. He has more than 25 years of experience in journalism, beginning his career covering towns in Greater Hartford. In the 1990s, Gosselin specialized in business coverage, and has had responsibilities for editing special sections for business.

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