

Road planners set to send US drivers in circles

By Alan Rappeport in New York

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US drivers are increasingly heading in new directions thanks in large part to an Oxford-educated small-town mayor who is leading the push to replace traffic lights with roundabouts.

American drivers tend to loathe driving in circles, instead favouring grids. But Jim Brainard, mayor of Carmel, Indiana, has made his town on the outskirts of Indianapolis the roundabout capital of the US, with 66 roundabouts in place after a 14-year campaign.

"There's a bit of a learning curve, but the safety implications are huge," said Mr Brainard, who became enamoured with the junctions while studying in the UK in the 1980s. "I could see virtually all intersections with a roundabout."

Roundabouts are still rare in the US, which got its first one in 1995 and has only about 2,000, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. In comparison, there are 20,000 in France, 15,000 in Australia and 10,000 in the UK.

"We have become aware that there are many more roundabouts in the planning and design stages, so the number built per year will likely increase," said Ed Rice, of the US Federal Highway Administration. The FHA estimates up to 250 roundabouts are being built per year.

Roundabout backers argue that although people tend to fear them at first, they make nervous drivers slow down, reducing the frequency and severity of crashes. They also cut down on emissions because cars don't burn fuel idling.

But opposition is still widespread. "What's good for traffic is going to be pretty tough for pedestrians," said John Freed, of Forest Lake, Minnesota, who led a campaign to stop six new roundabouts in 2007 and last July organised protests against a proposed roundabout near his office building because he feared that it would put pedestrians at risk.

Eugene Russell, chairman of the Transportation Research Board Roundabouts Task Force, notes several US states have started "roundabout first" policies, where municipalities must show that a traffic light is a better solution if they wish to erect one instead of a roundabout. He expects their growth to accelerate, pointing to research showing just 31 per cent of drivers support roundabouts before they are built but 63 per cent support them afterwards.

Still, resistance to new roundabouts is often fierce and online petitions abound with drivers raging against them as treacherous nuisances.

"People always think of that old Chevy Chase movie where they're trapped for hours going around Big Ben," Mr Russell said. "A lot of people don't like change."

As his roundabout drive has taken off, Mr Brainard has been asked to consult with mayors across the US on introducing them. Next year Carmel, home to 80,000 people, will host the National Roundabout Conference, where road planners can test drive the network of small traffic circles.

"In the beginning there was curiosity and some criticism, but now I'd be in great trouble if I tried to remove a roundabout," Mr Brainard said.

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