

# METRO-MOBILITY TALKS

## The Southside Raised Median Project and U-Turn "Loon" Areas

"Loons" Will Provide Additional Turning Space For Vehicles Making U-turns

Two highly traveled sections of Saratoga Boulevard and Staples Street will soon become safer for motorists thanks to an \$8.7 million project that will add raised medians to both roadways. Medians and strategically placed openings that will allow for safer left turns and U-turns are expected to reduce head-on collisions and related injuries.

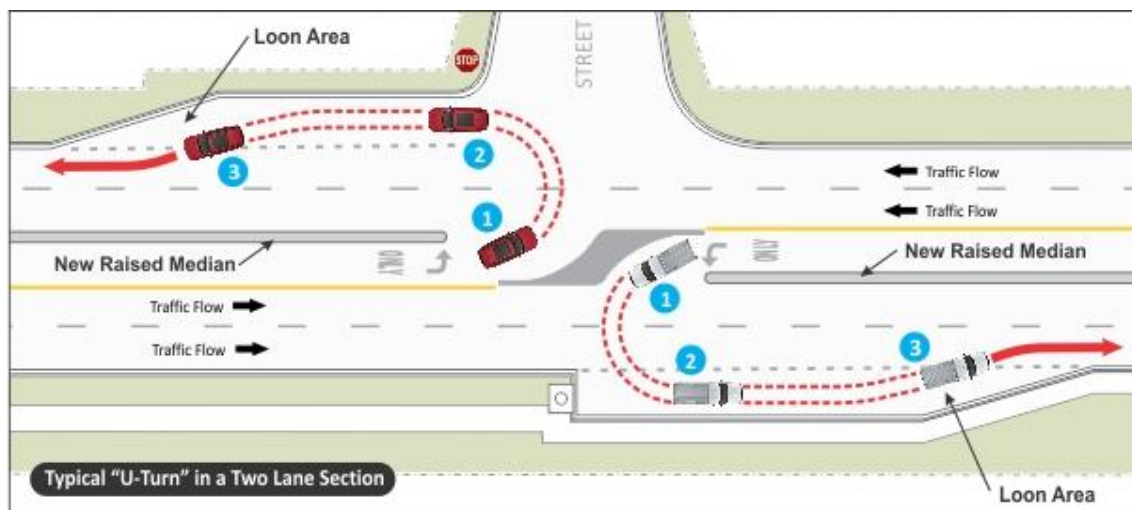
Work along the two separate two-mile sections has been combined into one project to save money and speed completion, said Paul Aguilar, project engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). TxDOT is the state agency responsible for planning, designing, building, maintaining, and operating state and federal highways in Texas. The two areas included in the project are Saratoga Boulevard from Rodd Field Road to Staples Street and Staples Street from Saratoga Boulevard to the Oso Creek Bridge.

Medians are being placed along both routes in what is now the center turn lane. Openings in the medians are being placed at major intersections and midway along blocks that do not contain cross streets. The two roadways and surrounding areas have experienced substantial growth in recent years, and growth is expected to continue into the foreseeable future.

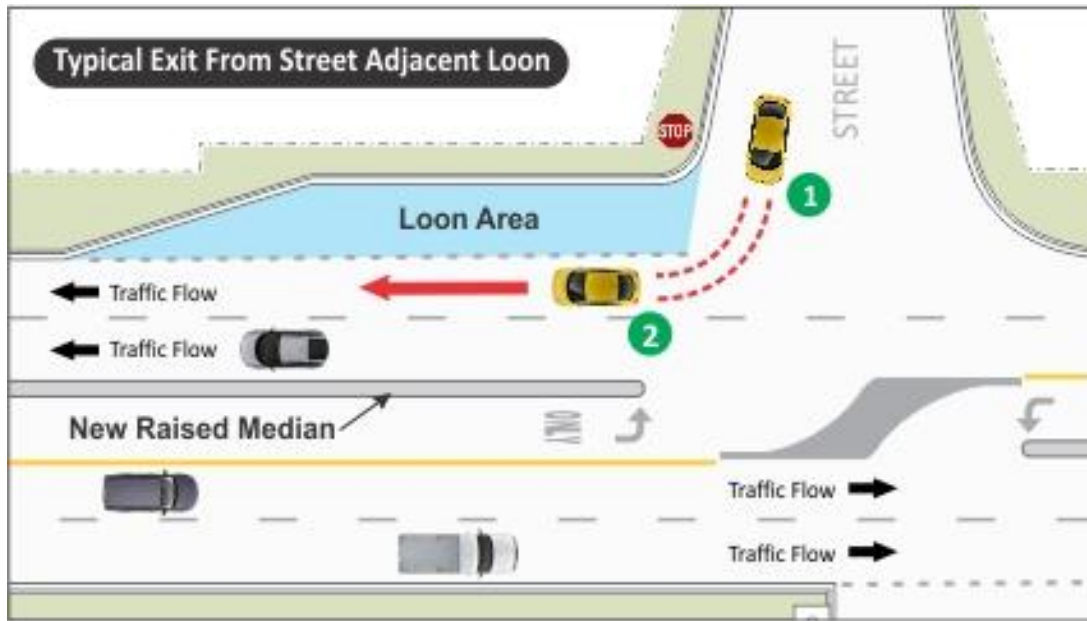
As it exists now, both roads lack a median and instead employ a middle turn lane used by traffic going in both directions. This leads to frequent head-on collisions when motorists traveling in opposite directions enter the middle turn lane at the same time. By adding a raised median with openings to allow protected left turns, head-on collisions will be greatly reduced. Traffic data, public input, and design criteria were considered when identifying median openings.

Studies show that adding a median to a road can reduce crash rates by about 37% and injury rates by about 48%. Improvements in other communities have shown that roads with fewer vehicle conflict points and adequate spacing between driveways have fewer collisions and better traffic flow. Congestion and traffic backups hinder access to businesses. Improving traffic flow reduces congestion and provides smoother, safer access for customers and deliveries.

To add to the safety, road improvements will include "loons" on two-lane sections of both roads to provide additional turning space for vehicles making U-turns. Loons make it easier for vehicles with a wide turning radius to complete a U-turn and merge into traffic (See Fig 1 and 2 below). Loons will not be added to sections of road with three lanes because the third lane provides enough space for vehicles with a wide turning radius. Loons are not large enough to accommodate U-turns by 18-wheel trucks.



**Figure 1:** 1 - Vehicle enters Left Turning Lane for "U" turn. The vehicle will proceed through a "U" turn when it is safe to do so. 2 - Vehicle will use "Loon" Area to complete "U" turn. 3 - Vehicles in the "Loon Area" will merge into traffic flow when it is safe to do so.



**Figure 2:** 1 - Vehicle at stop sign will proceed when is safe to do so. 2 - Vehicle will safely turn into the traffic flow lane, NOT the "Loon Area". The "Loon Area" is reserved for vehicles making "U" turns.

Improvements to Saratoga Boulevard and Staples Street are funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 allocated to the MPO and under TxDOT's direction. Evaluation of the project began in 2007 and included public hearings at Kaffie Middle School. Public hearings allowed landowners and business owners the opportunity to ask questions and make comments.

Work began around November/December 2010 and at first elicited complaints from drivers who did not understand the full scope of the project, said Aguilar. That's because work on the project began by milling the pavement along Staples Street, which many interpreted as unnecessary road improvements.

Work on the medians began in early July with the project scheduled for completion in November. The project is slated for a 22-month start-to-finish schedule, so work is, at the moment, several months ahead of schedule, Aguilar said.

The project began with the milling of four inches of existing pavement along both two-mile sections of road. Workers then repaved with two inches of hot mix (consisting of oil and rock) followed by a seal coat (consisting of oil and a different grade of rock). The next step was the forming and laying of curbs to form the medians.

TxDOT is working with a company that uses a machine to form and place curbs used to create medians. Curbs can be formed and placed at a rate of 1,400 feet per day. The median along Saratoga Boulevard will be filled with dirt and planted with grass. The Staples Street median will be made of crimson-colored stamped concrete designed to look like bricks.

Work on Saratoga Boulevard began at the Rodd Field Road intersection and proceeded toward Staples Street. Work on Staples Street will begin once Saratoga Boulevard is completed. To perform the work, the center lane and one lane on either side of the section that is being worked on has to be closed. This forces traffic into a single lane on both sides.

Only one major change in the project has been made since it was presented at public hearings, Aguilar said. An opening in the median between Rodd Field Road and Summer Ridge Drive was added because traffic could not safely make a U-turn at Rodd Field Road to gain access to a shopping center on the other side. The new median opening and left-turn lane will allow traffic to safely enter the shopping center.

Questions or comments about the project should be directed to Tom Tagliabue, TxDOT's public information officer, at 361-808-2481.

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