

## **Road projects tie up downtown traffic - Grand Prix preparations, utility work cause headaches**

By Michael Dresser, *The Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 2011

With the winter construction hiatus ended and road projects in full swing, Baltimore drivers are seeing orange — as safety cones and barrels mark many downtown roadwork sites. And thanks to a proliferation of lane closings, drivers have plenty of time to count them.

The current spate of traffic tie-ups, which are expected to continue a couple more months, are the result of a combination of utility projects and the city's continuing effort to prepare streets for a Grand Prix auto race in September.

"The bottom line is that these 'downtown projects' basically make going north and south through the center of the city impossible," said Meg Kelly of Locust Point. The triple whammy of work on Light, Charles and Howard streets has doubled the time of her 10-mile northbound commute to more than an hour, she said.

But to Gail Smith-Howard, general manager of the Hyatt Regency Hotel on Light Street, the road work is a matter of "short-term pain for long-term gain." She expects the Grand Prix event to generate a full house for at least three nights on Labor Day weekend, which is often slow for Baltimore hotels.

Light, Pratt and Howard streets are among the major streets included in the current burst of construction and maintenance. Conway Street, a short but vital connector that many northbound commuters use to get to the Inner Harbor, is the site of several projects involving both BGE gas lines and Baltimore's aspirations to be a center of IndyCar racing.

City officials expect the Grand Prix to bring up to 100,000 racing fans to Baltimore as the centerpiece of a three-day "festival of speed" that is part of the 2011 IZOD IndyCar Series. Race sponsors have attracted nationally known sponsors and have enlisted retired Gen. Colin L. Powell, the former secretary of state, to serve as grand marshal.

City officials say that much of the road work had to be done anyway and will benefit future Grand Prix races.

There are lane closings on both eastbound and westbound Conway at South Charles Street, where BGE is repairing minor, nonhazardous leaks from some of its gas lines. The resulting lane closings are in effect between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. on weekdays — including, at times, double closings that narrow traffic to a single lane. Adrienne Barnes, a spokeswoman for the Baltimore Department of Transportation, said that work is expected to continue another four to six weeks.

BGE is doing similar work along Light Street between Conway and Lee streets, near the intersection with Key Highway, Barnes said.

That work has been particularly vexing to South Baltimore residents because it seems to have dragged on so long.

"I host many events with hundreds of people throughout the year and have been forced to move them to the county because the traffic makes it not worth it," Kelly said.

"Unfortunately, for those of us who live on the south side of the harbor, we have no choice, and our lives have become a living hell."

The roadwork has forced Kelly to go all the way to Martin Luther King Boulevard — on the western fringe of downtown — so she can double back on Centre Street. Backups on Light Street, she said, can stretch all the way back to Harborview on Key Highway.

In addition to the utility work, the city has resumed paving and repair projects intended to prepare streets for the pounding they will take from dozens of Indy-style race cars on Sept. 2-4.

Paving projects connected with the race gave downtown drivers plenty to get honked off about last summer and fall before the pace of work dropped off over the winter. But with the arrival of spring, the road crews are out along several of the streets along a course winding around Oriole Park, the Convention Center and major Inner Harbor hotels.

Some of that work will take place along Conway. The city will shave an edge off the median where it nears Howard Street to help create a crooked passage that will take racing cars from the westbound to the eastbound lanes before jogging to the right to enter the Camden Yards parking lot.

Frank Murphy, the city's deputy transportation operations director, said the lane shift is intended to slow the cars before they cross the light rail tracks. As part of that work, crews are removing a portion of the Howard Street median and relocating a signal pole from there to the northwest corner of the intersection.

For the median work, crews have been periodically closing lanes of Howard Street where it leads from Interstate 395 into downtown at the intersection with Conway. The pole-moving operation, which will also close lanes, will take place in early May during the off-peak hours of 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., said Emory Carrigan, the city's construction supervisor for the downtown projects

Other Grand Prix-related work is occurring on Light near the intersection with Pratt, where city officials said inspectors found some faulty work that is being redone at a subcontractor's expense. He said other pavement improvements would be made on northbound Light between Lee and Pratt, and on southbound Light between Conway and Pratt.

Murphy said crews are now working in the north lanes of Pratt, a one-way street, between Paca and Calvert streets. When that is complete, the work will shift to the south lanes, he said.

Carrigan said drivers on northbound Charles Street, which is used by many Federal Hill residents to reach downtown, will face several weeks of single- and double-lane closings as the city rebuilds that concrete intersection with Pratt.

The city's contract with the Grand Prix requires that all the race-related repaving work be completed by the end of June, Carrigan said.

Ryan O'Doherty, a spokesman for Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, said the Grand Prix will bring the city jobs, millions of dollars of tax revenues and national television exposure.

"This is the kind of thing that can change people's perceptions of Baltimore for the better," he said. "The mayor believes you have to take a step back and look at the big picture for the city."

O'Doherty said the work, once done, will last for the five years of Grand Prix races the city has signed up for.

Councilman William H. Cole IV, a Grand Prix supporter, said much of the work being done for the race is rebuilding roads that were due for rehabilitation anyway.

Cole said the utility work — not the city's race preparations — is causing most of the headaches for his South Baltimore constituents. The time BGE has taken for the work on Light Street is "beyond frustrating," he said. "I'm about ready to scream if they don't get it wrapped up soon."

But Linda Foy, a BGE spokeswoman, denied that the utility has been dragging its feet and said much of its work has been advanced at the city's request to get it done before the race. She said BGE has been working on the projects about six weeks, largely because of heavy rain, not the 17 months that Cole believes the streets have been tied up.

Foy said the city asked it to perform a survey of its downtown gas lines before the race and that the utility found three "low-level leaks" that the Public Service Commission would not normally have required it to fix before the race.

She said that out of a concern for safety and in order to avoid having problems crop up during the event, BGE agreed to do the work this spring.

The BGE spokeswoman said the "labor-intensive" work involves wrapping a patch around gas mains that are in some cases 15 feet underground and intertwined with other utility lines.

Foy said the work should be completed by mid-May. A phase that is about to begin, with work on Charles Street just north of Conway and on Conway near Light, is expected to be finished in early June.

Cindy Salvatore, events manager at PassageMaker Magazine, said Baltimore will be glad it put up with the hassles. She grew up in Long Beach, Calif., one of the first cities to host an urban Grand Prix.

"I remember well the angst that was brought about by the ripped-up streets of Long Beach," she said. "Drivers were irate; residents were hugely inconvenienced. But 30-plus years later, the Toyota Grand Prix is one of the premier racing events in the country. The city of Long Beach has benefited greatly from this event."

Still, Kelly is skeptical that the gains from the race will ever outweigh the costs of preparing for it.

"I am not a fan," she said. "We are leaving Baltimore for that entire week and just want nothing to do with it."