

DID YOU KNOW???

ZIPPER MERGE BETTER THAN EARLY MERGE

You're driving along at 70 mph on an interstate highway and you see a sign stating that the right lane is closed ahead for construction. With traffic relatively heavy in both lanes, and knowing the two lanes will be reduced to only the left lane within the next couple of miles, when do you move into the left lane? The tendency is to want to do so as soon as possible, so that you won't get "blocked out" when you reach the final merge point. But, the left lane is already slowing down and you can make better time in the right lane, at least for now.

The above scenario is stressful for most drivers. Coupled with signs that normally urge drivers to merge early is the perception that if you merge early, you won't anger other drivers, which most likely will happen if you roll by the early mergers and then force your way into the lane that will remain open. These are "cheaters", right? And we don't like it when other drivers are cheaters.

However, studies have shown some interesting things relative to lane closure or lane drop situations. The early merge works reasonably well if traffic is very light, and highway speeds can be relatively maintained up to and through the construction zone. But, because any lane closure reduces the capacity of the highway, traffic jams often occur. Sometimes traffic backs up beyond the signs informing drivers of a lane closure.

Tom Vanderbilt, author of the book "Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do" writes that studies have shown a late merge, also called a zipper merge, like the teeth of a zipper, actually increases capacity through the construction zone by about 15 percent and simultaneously reduces the time it takes to get through the construction zone.

The way a zipper merge works is by posting signs beginning about 1 1/2 miles from the point of closure that first state USE BOTH LANES TO MERGE POINT. Next comes a ROAD WORK AHEAD or two, along with any speed limit reduction, and finally, at the point of the lane drop, TAKE TURNS - MERGE HERE. Surprisingly to many, this late merge actually cuts the length of the queue significantly. It also removes the insecurity or anxiety drivers feel in choosing lanes, as well as any annoyance with a passing "cheating" driver, according to Vanderbilt.

Personally, I have experienced this late merge or zipper merge often when driving in Montreal. With all the construction that is ongoing there, beginning with the Mercier Bridge several years ago and now with the complete re-build of the Turcott Interchange at the junction of Auto Routes 20, 15, and 720, lane closures are a way of life in Montreal. The Turcott interchange is the busiest interchange in the Province of Quebec. Although there is always a delay, the late merge scenario keeps queues shorter, traffic moving albeit at a slow pace, and, at the merge point, everyone takes their alternate turn, just like a zipper. In my experience, there is no bullying or forcing one's way ahead of the alternating vehicles. Should you be a bit slow at taking your turn to merge, the other lane will give you ample time and space. It's a whole new ballgame.

So, when encountering a lane closure in the future, don't hesitate to continue in either lane right up until you reach the merge point. You'll be glad you did.