

## **Maidstone Congestion Difficulties (A Practical Regeneration Led Solution?)**

Note -This is mainly a 'blue sky' exercise and has not been designed or trialled in any way.

### **Forward**

Maidstone, similar to many towns and cities throughout UK and the world experiences traffic congestion, usually at peak times although bottlenecks may occur at any time.

Maidstone has a number of arterial roads that meet at a central point in the town centre. These roads are A26, A20 and A229. It has two dual carriageways (part of the A229 and part of A249/A20) and three junctions to the M20 motorway (J5, 6 & 7).

Near to Junction 5 and Junction 7 are Park & Ride facilities located at the A20 and A249 respectively, a further park & Ride is located further away from the town and is not viewed as a facility supporting motorway commuters.

The town has two rail stations Maidstone East & West. Maidstone east is adjacent to the town centre and Maidstone West lies to the west of town beyond the river Medway. There is a further 'halt' Maidstone Barracks which acts as a transfer point for passengers wishing to change rail-line services.

The town is served by a number of independent bus operators.

### **Symptoms of Congestion.**

Clearly the main cause of congestion at either end of the working day is commuter traffic -both work and school run related.

A second cause of congestion is the town's proximity to the M20 and should the M20 motorway become closed between Junction 4 and 8 in either direction, the traffic is mainly routed through the town centre.

Thirdly and allied to the above paragraph, is Operation Stack. This congestion related occurrence is more prevalent during times of bad weather in the Channel or industrial action at the costal ports.

### **Causes of Congestion**

As previously mentioned the town centre acts as a focus point for three main routes that meet at the River Medway forming a gyratory (#1). The transport network at this point comprises 5 roads, all of which feed onto a bridge gyratory system. Of these 5 feed routes, 4 are controlled by traffic lights monitored and controlled by Kent Highways Services and of these

4, one route is exclusive for buses and taxis. Additionally one set of lights doubles as a 'pelican crossing'. Only one area of the gyratory is designated as a 'Yellow Box' junction.

To the west of the bridge gyratory is another gyratory (#2) at Tonbridge Road (A26) and London Road (A20), to the South-east of the bridge gyratory is a further gyratory (#3) bounded by Palace Avenue (A229/A20 –southbound), Knightrider Street ('A249/A20') and College Avenue (A229 –northbound).

On the east side of town is one further gyratory system (#4) bounded by Sittingbourne Road/Wat Tyler Way (A249) and Ashford Road (A20).

Each of these gyratory routes become heavily congested at the morning and afternoon 'rush-hours' and at times traffic can 'back up' on all the main routes into town by 1 mile, increasing journey times by 20 minutes or more. Of specific note, gyratory #2 and #3 remain extremely congested during most of the day.

Other factors which are peripheral to congestion but may be considered to potentially impact greatly upon local pinch points in the town centre include:

#### **Barker Road junction.**

This road is the only way in and out for the residents of Hart Street, the commercial trade estate and users of the Lockmeadow entertainment complex. The junction is controlled by traffic lights and at peak times these lights contribute to traffic flow issues at gyratory #1.

#### **St Peter's Street junction.**

The junction of St Peter's Street and the bridge gyratory is not controlled by traffic lights. St Peter's Street has become increasingly populated by commercial and residential interests, and recently a new hotel and furniture store has been built.

#### **Romney Place junction.**

This can sometimes cause tailbacks into Lower Stone Street and round to Palace Avenue.

#### **Mote Road junction.**

This junction provides right turn access to Mote Road from Watt Tyler Way and also right turn access from Mote Road to Watt Tyler Way.

#### **Diagnosis of Congestion**

It is certainly clear that traffic volume peaks during the morning and evening rush-hour periods caused by people driving to work or as part of the school-run, or a combination of both. Many of the town's roads arterial roads are narrow by modern design standards, these restrictions being due, in the main, to the sides of the road being bounded by residential or commercial property on one or both sides.

The town 'ring road' (effectively J6 M20 via the A229 to J7 M20 via A249) is interrupted by gyratories # 1,3 and 4 and also traffic lights at the junction of Mote Road.

There are a number of traffic control points beyond the gyratory systems which contribute to congestion.

### **Solutions to the Problem?**

The following are suggestions for what MAY be solutions to some of the issues surrounding congestion in the town's environs, but are no means definitive.

Firstly and as a general point, it has been noticeable that congestion in the town has diminished in recent months and appears, in part to be directly proportional to the rising cost of fuel. Humans are creature of habit and it will remain to be seen whether they adapt to the environment of higher fuel costs as part of their general expenses, or that it brings forth a more permanent change in vehicle use behaviour. It could therefore be argued that some form of road-pricing may reduce vehicle transport movements further, however this is outside the scope of this paper.

In 1999 I prepared a dissertation for my BSc Honours degree which studied the effect of pedestrianisation on town centre rents, the result of this work drew a number of views from retailers and agents of which accessible and plentiful town centre parking, and an efficient road network were seen as key elements in enhancing a town centre's viability. It is certainly the case that the town's road network is not efficient and it is also questionable whether the bulk of town centre parking is accessible, the exception being Fremlin Walk, however this car park can create traffic problems onto the main road at times of peak usage, so could of itself be viewed as interfering with the efficiency of the road network.

The main routes of the town appear littered with traffic lights, at nearly every junction on the through arterial roads there is a set of traffic lights either purely for traffic management or with an element of pedestrian control. Many of the junctions may potentially be considered suitable for re-alignment, redirection or closure, with a view to reducing the interruptions to traffic flow whilst still maintaining the integrity of the road network.

Widening this to identify certain specific areas where realignment may improve efficiency of vehicle flow without detriment to the pedestrian.

### **Barker Road.**

There is redevelopment potential of the immediate area bounded by Barker Road and part of Hart Street and to include the former Whitehouse car showroom.

The development of residential flats at Hart Street has increased traffic flow at this location and the recent introduction of a fast service to London from Maidstone West will increase the demand for commuter parking in this area. Realignment of London Road and Barker Road to introduce a roundabout would remove the need for traffic lights at this junction, it would also negate the need for any vehicle to traverse the bridge gyratory in order to reach Lockmeadow, improve access to Maidstone West and increase the ease with which vehicles travelling from the A20 may reach the A26. Further realignment would enable the bus stop at the beginning of Tonbridge Road to be relocated to the station area, thus reducing obstruction on the traffic route of Tonbridge Road. (Benefits –improvement to the Barker Road/Maidstone West junction/access should reduce congestion in all directions).

#### **Earl Street & Medway Street.**

The traffic control at Medway Street could be removed and access to and from the A229 could be closed off, with traffic re-routed via Earl Street. Medway Street is little more than a service road to access retail delivery areas and a car park. Closing Medway Street would have no effect upon the operation of existing businesses or service provision. (Benefit – reduces number of interruptions/delays on A229).

#### **Lower Stone Street & Romney Place.**

Close off the left turn into Romney Place except for buses and private hire. Close off to private cars access to Lower Stone Street from Romney Place. (benefit –reduces tailbacks onto Lower Stone Street and Palace Avenue).

#### **Mote Road & Watt Tyler Way.**

Close off the right turn capability on Watt Tyler Way and Mote Road. Construct a new roundabout at the junction of Watt Tyler Way and Romney Place. (benefit –freer flowing traffic northbound on A229).

#### **Gyratory #4.**

Re-route traffic flow at these junctions. Close off access from Watt Tyler Way to Sittingbourne Road and create new roundabout. Redirect traffic to new roundabout at Square Hill Road linking to Andrew Broughton Way. (benefit –likely to reduce bottleneck congestion/virtual gridlock, also links 'island site' to the main town area).

I did sketch some of these out some time ago as part of a presentation to the Regeneration Group which never occurred. I have since got rid of them, but can re-draw if necessary and if considered they will aid the descriptions given above.

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