



Frequently Asked Questions

Oregon Department of Transportation

Region 3: Southwest Oregon

Oregon 42 'zipper merge' at bridge over I-5

In August, ODOT plans to introduce a "zipper merge" at the east end of Oregon 42, where the two eastbound lanes narrow to a single lane near the bridge over Interstate 5.

The zipper merge, which includes new signs and pavement markings, is expected to help improve safety and the flow of traffic. Drivers are encouraged to use both lanes all the way to the merge point, then take turns merging when the road narrows to one lane.

After ODOT announced the change, several people made comments and asked questions on social media. We would like to share our responses below.

What problem is the zipper merge supposed to solve?

During busy times of day, drivers traveling east on Oregon 42 through the Green District tend to favor the left lane. We believe this is related to the way eastbound Oregon 42 traffic narrows down to one lane as the highway approaches the bridge over I-5. The signs and pavement markings near the bridge suggest that the left lane will continue straight and the right lane will terminate. Many drivers merge into the left lane miles ahead of the bridge, probably so they don't have to make a lane change later on.

Unfortunately, this creates a lane imbalance through the Green District, with far more vehicles in the highway's left lane than the right. This lane imbalance can affect traffic at other highway intersections.

For example, a long line of cars and trucks in the left lane takes more time to clear a traffic signal than if those vehicles were evenly distributed across two lanes. Likewise, if a traffic signal is set for a limited time on green, fewer vehicles will be able to clear the green light if they are mostly lined up in one lane. A lane imbalance can create more traffic congestion while slowing everybody down. On the other hand, using both lanes allows vehicles to pass through an intersection more quickly and efficiently.

The new zipper merge design will treat both lanes equally so that drivers are less likely to favor one lane over the other as they drive through Winston and the Green District.



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Isn't there already a zipper merge here?

Not exactly. Although two lanes narrow down to one at this location, that doesn't necessarily mean drivers were using the zipper merge technique. We plan to add signs and pavement markings that encourage eastbound Oregon 42 drivers to use both lanes and take turns merging as they approach the bridge over I-5.

What's going to be different?

Before this project began, there was a yellow sign at the merge point that showed a left lane continuing straight and a right lane that was ending. The sign implied that the left lane was the primary "through" lane, and those in the right lane were required to move over. The white arrow in the right lane pointing left sent the same message. Many drivers who thought the left lane was the primary lane merged left as early as possible, often before entering the Green District.

But the new sign pattern shows both lanes narrowing to a single lane. Drivers have less incentive to cluster in one lane or the other since neither side appears to be the primary lane. A pair of arrows on the pavement point toward the center, suggesting that drivers in both lanes need to merge toward the middle and into the new shared lane.



I like being in the left lane. Do I have to use the right lane?

No, there are two lanes and it's perfectly fine to use the left lane if that's your preference. We believe changing the signs and pavement markings will make more people feel comfortable using the right lane, so there will be more of a balance between left and right lanes throughout the corridor.

Also, zipper merges are better suited for crowded conditions. For example, during the busy morning commute with drivers using both lanes, the zipper merge promotes smooth, efficient merging. During low-traffic times, it's OK to use whichever lane you prefer.

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Am I cheating if I use the empty right lane until it ends? Other drivers honk and make rude gestures.

No, you're not cheating. When drivers form a long line in the left lane, traffic can back up and interfere with other intersections. That lane imbalance means fewer vehicles on Oregon 42 can get through a green traffic signal at Grant Smith Road and Carnes Road (Kelley's Corner), or that it takes longer to clear the green light. The best solution is for drivers to use both lanes, so traffic doesn't back up as far.

While it may feel like cheating to use the right lane and pass everyone, it's OK as long as you're traveling at a safe and reasonable speed.

Whether you're in the left lane or right lane, use your turn signal as you approach the merge point. Someone will let you in. Anyone who intentionally blocks you is breaking the law.



Do I have to use my turn signal at the merge point?

Yes, it's the law. Because the design transitions from two lanes into one with both lanes merging, all drivers are required to use their turn signal. When in doubt, it's always a good idea to let other drivers know what you're planning to do.

It's jerks who wait until the last seconds and merge at a high speed that irritate me.

They irritate us, too. But one reason they're driving fast is because traffic in the left lane is often backed up and slow. When nobody is in the right lane, they can go much faster.

But when drivers use the zipper merge, we tend to see more vehicles in both lanes. The right lane is no longer empty, and people can't practice their NASCAR moves. A zipper merge can lead to improved lane balance and help reduce the amount of speeding.

This seems like a waste of money. How much does the zipper merge cost?

The materials used to create a zipper merge are relatively inexpensive. If we had gone back to the old traffic pattern after paving this area, we still would have needed to install a handful of yellow signs and three thermoplastic white arrow pavement markings. The zipper merge required two additional signs and three more pavement arrows. In the end, the additional items needed for the zipper merge cost less than \$2,000.

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The divider is a nice addition. (No, it's a waste of money.)

The new concrete barrier that extends from the northbound ramps and across the bridge was not needed as part of the zipper merge. The barrier is a separate safety feature intended to prevent head-on and lane-departure crashes. Some people like it. Others don't. We understand how people feel, but we believe the barrier will save lives.

Do you really expect this to work?

A zipper merge is not going to solve every problem in this area, but we think it's a step in the right direction. A zipper merge encourages use of both lanes, which will help moderate speeds and prevent backups from interfering with side roads and other intersections. Zipper merges promote a sense of fairness and help prevent aggressive driving and road rage.

We believe most drivers value fairness and want to do the right thing. Many people get in the left lane early because they think it's what they're supposed to do. They feel like they would be cheating if they use the right lane to get ahead of everyone else.

But it's not cheating to drive efficiently and use the road for its intended purpose. If all those well-intentioned people in the left lane begin using both lanes, we're confident the zipper merge will be a success.

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