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What a relief extra lanes on the N.J. Turnpike are

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The northbound lanes are open October 26, 2014, on the massive \$2.5 billion project to widen the New Jersey Turnpike between Interchanges 6 and 9. (TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer)

Edward Colimore, Inquirer Staff Writer

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What a difference a few extra lanes make.

The 35-mile stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike from Mansfield in Burlington County to East Brunswick in Middlesex County was dreaded by motorists, who were regularly held up in annoying traffic jams.

But now - a few weeks after the completion of a \$2.3 billion widening project - many are singing the turnpike's praises, even as the major artery faces its first big test: the Thanksgiving weekend, with the year's heaviest volume.

The usual stop-and-crawl delays of a half-hour to nearly an hour - especially on the Wednesdays before the holiday - should be history, officials said. No more backups of 11 miles



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northbound and nine miles southbound - the standard for travel on the day before

Thanksgiving.

"We expect people who use Route 1 and I-295 and other local roads may find the turnpike a more palatable alternative, because the traffic is flowing more freely," said Tom Feeney, a New Jersey Turnpike Authority spokesman. "You used to see people sitting in traffic, and now you're not."

The number of vehicles using the turnpike from Wednesday through Monday is expected to increase from about 3,479,000 last year to 3,550,000 this year, Feeney said.

Wednesday - a day when rain, wind, and one to three inches of snow are predicted to move into the region - is the heaviest travel day, with an anticipated 686,000 motorists compared with 641,000 last year.

Monday is the second busiest, with an expected 664,000 travelers compared with 658,000 last year, Feeney said.

Many of them will be part of an estimated 46.3 million people who will travel 50 miles or more from their homes during the long weekend - the highest volume for the holiday period since 2007 and a 4.2 percent increase over 2013, the American Automobile Association said.

Between Exits 6 and 8A, lanes in each direction were doubled from three to six, while north of that to Exit 9, one lane was added to each side, bringing the stretch to 12 lanes.

The widening project "has been a success," Feeney said. "We've received a lot of positive comments.

"The benefits of the project are immediately apparent," he said.

At the Woodrow Wilson Service Area on the northbound turnpike in Hamilton Township, Mercer County, tractor-trailer driver Louis Tuck could not have been happier. Free-flowing traffic means more money in his pocket.

"I get paid when my wheels are turning - 36 cents a mile," said Tuck, 64, a St. Louis resident who was hauling tubs and shower stalls. "The federal law only allows me to drive 11 hours a day.

"If I get delayed an hour, it costs me \$30," he said. "I was here when the construction was going on and it was nasty, but since then, it's been beautiful - no delays."

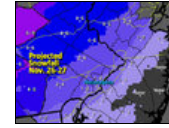
The construction work - the largest added-capacity project in the turnpike's 63-year history - began in 2009. It was paid for by a toll increase approved by the Turnpike Authority in 2008.

"Last year, it was real bad," said tractor-trailer driver Jessie Robbins, 25, of Columbia, Miss., during a stop at the service area. "Even if the speed limit was 65, you were going 30.

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"Now, I can run 65 and keep going," he said. "It's so much better."

Nearby, motorist Mike Harmon stopped to walk his dog on the grass. "We're making good time," said Harmon, 47, of Baltimore. "It's been nice and smooth."

The traffic jams seem to have been eliminated, added motorist John Grier, 50, of Drexel Hill.

"It would always get backed up between 7 and 9," Grier said. "It was like gridlock before."

"Now it's totally different, like night and day," he said. "At least you can do the speed limit."

That's what New Jersey state police will be checking.

"We'll see how it goes over the holidays," said Capt. Eric Heitmann, trooper commander for the turnpike and Garden State Parkway. "We've added some additional patrols in the last few weeks."

"We haven't noticed any added speed. The traffic is moving, but we haven't seen the racetrack element."

The opening of the extra lanes and the end of construction have, however, had their impact on the bottom line at the Wilson Service Area, said its manager, Syed Ali.

"Last year was a mess," he said. "We lost a significant amount of business, about 30 percent, and now it's back."

At the Richard Stockton Service Area on the southbound turnpike in Hamilton Township, travelers also were breathing a sigh of relief.

"It was really lousy before," said Larry Senio, 64, a retired engineer who was moving from Delaware to Hampton Beach, N.H. "It's way better now."

Walking back to his tractor-trailer rig at the Stockton Service Area, Steve McNally was about to begin a long journey. He was picking up a load of baking soda in Pottsville, Pa., and taking it to Janesville, Wis.

"There are still a few bumps near the bridges," said McNally, 58, of Rockford, Ill. "But I'm going through quicker. It's been an improvement."

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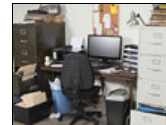
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