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## **Alternate merging. Why can't we do it right?**

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Traffic headed to Folly Beach merges from two lanes into one Saturday about a mile before crossing onto the island.

As two lanes merge into one, the asphalt becomes the stage for good and evil to battle on.

The dominant, straight-ahead lane backs up with the majority of cars. Those in the less-populated merging lane cruise past them, looking for a bit of kindness or preying on an opportunity to squeeze in. The drivers stuck in the long line start fuming. Some of them make defensive moves.

They ride bumpers to refuse entry to the interlopers, perhaps increasing the risk of rear-enders. They straddle the line and try to block cars from going past. People express their feelings with the usual hand signals.

It's a decision every driver faces at some point: Do the "right" thing and get in line early, or keep on going and cut in.

This scenario takes place during rush hour almost every day on the Stono bridge between James and Johns islands; on weekends on Folly Road heading to Folly Beach; and at numerous other spots around the Lowcountry.

But what if a relatively simple shift in our behavior made the situation better? Made traffic move more steadily and took the guesswork out of the jam?

Ever heard of "alternate merge?" The idea is to take turns.

A small sign says as much on the Stono River span. It reads, "Notice — Alternate merge when congested."



It went up at some point after the bridge opened in 2003. But apparently, people aren't heeding the message. It's entirely possible they don't even know what it means.

Pete Poore, director of communications for the S.C. Department of Transportation, doesn't know, or didn't, until it was explained. The agency is responsible for the sign.

Laura Heidtman didn't know either. The 50-year-old has a lifetime of experience with beach traffic jams, being born and raised on Folly Island. But Heidtman hasn't had cause to wonder about "alternate merge," since there's no sign advising it where Folly Road becomes one lane just past Bowen's Island.

Heidtman tries to be courteous when caught in a traffic jam there, giving some cars the benefit of the doubt and allowing them to merge. Her goodwill is tested by those "zooming past everybody and trying to shoot in," especially if they are locals.

On the other hand, it also makes her angry to see "people being jerks, closing up real tight and not letting them in."

Her solution is to simply stay away. "Most of us who live out here try to avoid driving on the weekends."

Roman Conte admits he is, or was, one of those drivers who make blood boil. A recent transplant from Ohio, the 61-year-old works at a private parking lot on Folly Beach.

For a time, Conte played dumb. He drove in the right lane past all the cars backed up in the left, merging at the last minute.

"I used to take advantage with the out-of-state plates. Now I have a South Carolina plate, so it's hard to get away with that."

Those cruising full speed ahead really tick off Mark Patrick, 35, who manages the Folly Beach pier.

His reaction? "I'll ride the bumper in front of me to make sure nobody else gets in."

Patrick believes it's not just tourists who don't know better; he sees plenty of locals using the right lane like an express route.

Merge mechanisms

So exactly what is "alternate merge when congested"?



At the first sign of congestion, drivers should fill both lanes relatively equally. At the merge point, they should take turns, one by one. You go, I go. That establishes rhythm and predictability, and traffic moves steadily, if not faster. And no one has to get mad.

In theory.

Tony Sheppard, director of traffic engineering for the state DOT, thinks alternate versus random merging does make traffic flow better, but said it's needed only when the roadway is clogged. Otherwise, when cars are moving freely, drivers should get into the go-ahead lane as soon as they can.

He compares the concept of alternate merge to a four-way stop sign, and said a rhythm can be developed.

“You know when you pull up to a four-way stop sign, you yield to the person there prior to you or yield to the person on the right if you both get there at the same time. That way, the motorists know what action to take and when.”

But how do people know at which point to start filling both lanes?

Sheppard concedes it's a tough call.

“Because it's going to be a perception of the driver on that congestion. At any time they see that left lane starting to break down — almost stopping — when that occurs, that's when you want to get into that alternate merge. You no longer have the free-flow condition of that left lane.”

Joseph Robinson, 24, a Charleston city firefighter who lives on Johns Island, has no reservations about being in the right lane on the Stono bridge all the way up to the merge point.

“There's no point in continuously blocking (up) the left lane that's already longer,” he said. “It's just like a grocery line. If everyone is on one line and no one's in the other line,” shoppers don't hesitate to go for the open one.

Robinson doesn't feel at all like he's cheating. “Because that's the way the DOT designed the road.”

Alternate merging on the Stono bridge might help congestion because traffic wouldn't back up as far, but there will still be a blockage, said Charleston police Sgt. Matt Wojslawowicz of the Special Units division.



The number of cars isn't going to change, he pointed out.

"You're still trying to shove all those cars into a one-lane roadway."

Still, he thinks alternate merging helps with traffic fluidity, and with no Johns Island road relief in sight anytime soon, any improvement is welcome. Trouble is, he said, either commuters don't know what it is or drivers in the merging lane are afraid the other drivers won't let them in.

Wojslawowicz said better signage, roadway paint and perhaps flashing lights might make the public more aware of what to do.

"It seems pointless to me if you have a lane that continues another 300 yards, why not utilize it?"

A spokesman for the Charleston County Sheriff's Office said it didn't want to comment on the effectiveness of alternate merge, signage or driver behavior.

"The sheriff's department doesn't want to give an opinion on traffic control devices established by the Department of Transportation," said Capt. Mike Stanley.

#### Head games

When people get behind the wheel, they often act like they're surrounded by heavy-metal armor, like a tank, said Cindy Grosso, founder of the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette.

"If you didn't have the car around you, would you be doing the same things?"

She gives the analogy of walking on a sidewalk. If pedestrians had to get in single file to go around construction, for instance, would they block a person out?

"Courtesy is courtesy," she said.

In the case of alternate merge, Grosso thinks education is the key.

"I think a lot of the road rage is not knowing what is correct," she said.

If drivers understand the merge concept, they shouldn't feel the person in the right lane is the aggressor, she said.



“That is the etiquette of alternate merge.”

Buster Blalock, 56, of James Island, who also manages a parking lot at Folly Beach, thinks alternate merge would probably work better than not, “but how do you get people to do that?”

Some speculate that Southerners aren't as accustomed to heavy traffic as found in more densely populated areas of the country and might be reacting differently.

One is John Lapensee of James Island, who works at a golf course on Kiawah Island a few days a week. Originally from Boston, he's lived in Charleston for 10 years.

“Alternate merge is an attitude that people either accept or they don't,” he said.

He thinks the alternate merge sign on the Stono bridge is pretty worthless because it's too close to the actual merge point, which doesn't give people their cue soon enough.

Lapensee proposes a flashing yellow light and a sign designating a specified time for alternate merge, say 3:30-5:30 p.m., and locating them farther back, just after the stoplight at Headquarters Island.

“I don't think there is any easy answer,” he said. “But information is paramount.”

