



# Herald-Tribune

## SARASOTA MOTORISTS TAKE THEIR BARRIER ISLAND TRAFFIC CONGESTION FRUSTRATIONS TO CITY LEADERS

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SARASOTA — A worker ran out of gas sitting in traffic on Longboat Key. A manager said it takes more than two hours to return home to the mainland across John Ringling Causeway. A woman quit her job as a caregiver for a senior resident on Longboat because the two-hour commute became too much.

The homebound resident she cared for is still looking for a caregiver willing to fight traffic.

Since January, Sarasota Mayor Jen Ahearn-Koch has received 56 emails from frustrated motorists, stuck in gridlocked traffic from downtown Sarasota to St. Armands Circle.

One man even sent Ahearn-Koch his Sarasota Orchestra

ticket to a missed performance.

Traffic was so bad on Presidents Day last Monday that the mayor herself was stuck behind tail lights for three hours. She was coming back with her family from a sunset picnic at Lido Beach.

“I have never experienced this kind of heavy traffic in my 49 years in Sarasota,” Ahearn-Koch said in a recent email to a constituent.

While gridlock has irked locals for years, construction on roundabouts and on U.S. 41 has caused additional and significant traffic headaches in recent months.



As local officials search for alternative transportation solutions, like a water taxi and increasing bicycle and pedestrian movement, city and state officials are also urging drivers to be patient as the long-term benefits far outweigh

short-term delays, they say.

“At the end of the day, when you have a safer road to travel, you ease congestion and you save lives,” said Brian Rick, a Florida Department of Transportation spokesman.

Most of the roadways and construction projects causing motorists’ anger are under the purview of FDOT, the state’s main transportation agency.

That is the agency overseeing the U.S. 41 roundabout projects at 10th and 14th streets, along with the planned intersection overhaul on Gulfstream Avenue.

While city officials’ hands are mostly tied when it comes to solving congestion on and off the barrier islands, Sarasota is attempting to “double down” on communication with stakeholders like the Town of Longboat Key to discuss immediate, mid-term and long-term solutions to traffic woes, said City Manager Tom Barwin.

## **Traffic woes**

Julie Klick isn’t just frustrated with traffic on and off the barrier islands. She is worried.

Klick relies on a caregiver to help her 19-year-old son with cerebral palsy. Someday soon, Klick feels that the nurse will no longer make the trip to south Longboat Key. Her son is nonverbal and relies on a wheelchair. Without help, it will be hard.

“It’s hard enough to find a caregiver who will work on

Longboat,” said Klick. “I don’t want to lose her.”  
Lately, Klick has let her go early so the caregiver can try to beat traffic.

Traffic has also forced Klick to cancel some of her son’s therapy appointments off the island. Klick, a real estate agent on the barrier islands, has also heard from her colleagues that traffic is causing a dip in home sales.

Gil Weiner told Ahearn-Koch in an email on Feb. 19 that he has an hour-long delay from his home in downtown Sarasota to the barrier islands, where he has worked in the afternoons for almost 10 years.

“Nice easy trip. But not anymore, and no end in sight,” Weiner said.

At work, Weiner chats with out-of-town snowbirds and visitors. The conversation has now shifted from red tide to traffic, he said.

“Lots have said something to the effect, ‘I’m not doing this again,’” Weiner said. “Word is getting out — tourism is important to our area, and what is happening now is threatening that.”

B.J. Bishop, a Longboat Key commissioner-elect, has lived on the island for 18 years.

Bishop emailed Ahearn-Koch last week to say that her longtime repairman refuses to come to her home on Longboat Key because of the time it takes to get there.

Bishop, like many Longboat Key residents, is leaving home

as little as possible.

Bishop told the Herald-Tribune that Florida State Road 789, the island-hopping main drag that changes names a few times along its path from Anna Maria to St. Armands Key, is backed up at least 10 miles some days.

What is normally a 25-minute trip to Sarasota now takes over an hour, Bishop said. She's been late to performances on the mainland. She has also canceled medical appointments because the car trip itself is too painful on her back and shoulders.

Bishop said that Ahearn-Koch has been "incredibly responsive and sympathetic."

But traffic light adjustments and other attempted fixes by local officials have at times made things worse, Bishop said.

### **Why roundabouts?**

The roundabouts on U.S. 41 have been part of Sarasota's vision to improve bayfront connectivity and traffic flow for over two decades.

A recent report to the FDOT last March said that the roundabout at U.S. 41 and Fruitville Road, when completed, would reduce delay during peak hours in February by over half. The report also said that the roundabout at Gulfstream Avenue will have positive outcomes in winter months. FDOT has said that roundabouts significantly improve traffic flow and enhance safety for motorists and pedestrians.

"We will have to hunker down and get through and enjoy the

benefits when it's finished," Barwin said.

Construction on these roundabouts is done in the cooler months because the weather is better, Barwin said. Work is also done during the day because of the potential for light and noise pollution that could disturb nearby downtown residents.

The city has been working on a strategy to push off some of the construction until after the height of tourist season, he said.

Another hope is to increase pedestrian and bike options going out to the barrier islands.

"I'm not suggesting everyone bike, but the more people who do, the less traffic we have on the streets," said Barwin, an avid bicyclist who is often seen riding into work.

Sarasota is working to reimagine its vision for getting around the city in the next 25 years, hoping to shift to a less car-centric approach. A water-taxi is in the works. Much of the work being done on U.S. 41 near downtown Sarasota is to help encourage foot traffic to the 53-acre Bay Project. The city also added a pilot bicycle program at the St. Armands parking garage with hopes to expand it elsewhere in the city.

However, that vision has at times run up against several key decisions by city leaders. Commissioners last year rejected a drastic Fruitville Road redesign that aimed to facilitate safe walkability between downtown and the Rosemary and Gillespie Park neighborhoods.

Barwin remains optimistic that the vision can come to life.

A feasibility study that examines the best locations where water taxis could potentially operate and dock with ample parking will soon be presented before the commission, he said. A barrier island traffic study is also almost ready.

But for now?

“Thank God for hands-free phones and podcasts,” Barwin said. “There are things we can do in the meantime to get through.”