



Coming Around to Roundabouts

When the State Highway Administration announced last fall that it would build Maryland's first modern roundabout at the intersection of Routes 144 and 94 in Lisbon, many residents of the west Howard County community objected.

Less than a year later — and four months after the roundabout opened — few Lisbonites are complaining about the one-way, single-lane circle that works much like a revolving door; vehicles approaching the circle from any of the four directions enter only after an opening has emerged. The roundabout's circular layout and low speed limit keep accidents to a minimum. Accidents also are expected to be less violent than the perpendicular collisions common at large intersections.

To date, only one minor side-swiping has occurred in the circle. And now the residents like it so much that they might take up arms if the state decides to change the roundabout back into a standard intersection with lights and stop signs.

Even defenders of the former configuration at Routes 144 and 94 would have to concede that it used to be a dangerous crossing. State officials say it was one of the worst in the state: 40 accidents

and 49 people injured in a recent five-year period.

The danger factor, as well as the relatively low volume of area traffic, convinced the state to pick the Lisbon intersection for the roundabout experiment. According to SHA officials, a roundabout is safer and more cost-efficient than a traffic signal, as borne out by studies of modern circles in foreign countries.

It didn't take long for Lisbonites to be sold on the concept. The circle was only six weeks old when a

local citizens' committee voted overwhelmingly to make the roundabout permanent. The state will do so by the end of the summer, finishing work on the center island and installing a raised lane that only trucks will be able to use but at reduced speeds.

State officials hope to install several more roundabouts in Maryland this year, including one in Columbia, two in Western Maryland and another on the Eastern Shore. The Howard County government plans to build two others in Columbia.

Finding potential sites is easy, officials say. The roadblocks will be when local folks won't accept the idea. Why not simply refer them to all those Lisbonites who came around to liking roundabouts? (August 9, 1993)

HOWARD COUNTY

From Berated to Beloved

We won't pretend we knew ahead of time that the roundabout in Lisbon was destined to be the toast of that small western Howard County town. Frankly, that wouldn't have been a smart bet, because local residents avidly opposed the State Highway Administration's plans to turn the traditional four-way crossing at Routes 144 and 94 into Maryland's first modern traffic circle.

But wonder of wonders: The roundabout was installed a year ago, the once-dangerous intersection became virtually accident-free and erstwhile opponents found it easier to negotiate than they had feared. Instead of cursing the circle, they sing its praises. One Lisbon resident has even begun marketing baseball caps (\$8 a pop) and shirts (\$12) that trumpet the town as "Home of Maryland's First Round-About."

No, we won't say we foresaw the roundabout's success. Yet anyone with a long memory of controversial civic projects might have felt somewhat safe predicting the happy ending for Lisbon's traffic circle. For instance, when the Rouse Co. hatched a plan to make a people-magnet out of Baltimore's rat-infested Inner Harbor, critics hooted at the improbability of the idea. Fourteen years later, Har-

borplace remains one of the region's top tourist draws, having opened the way for the National Aquarium, the Pier 6 Pavilion and the Gallery. Another downtown development denigrated in its planning stages as a waste of public money: Oriole Park at Camden Yards. Its bedazzling mixture of old and new quickly earned it status as the current standard for baseball stadiums.

Other examples? The Chesapeake Bay Bridge, which is at least as important to Ocean City's economy as skee ball. Towson Commons, the retail-dining-movie complex fought bitterly by community groups but now credited with bringing needed nightlife to the Baltimore County seat. Light rail, spurned at first by communities (Hunt Valley and Glen Burnie, to name two) that later put themselves on the list for future stops.

Certainly the public and private sectors have created their share of flops. But as in the case of the Lisbon roundabout, government and business officials deserve credit for having the vision and the persistence to create important civic institutions, often for a citizenry whose initial enthusiasm for them is less than overwhelming. (April 5, 1994)

HOWARD COUNTY