



# A method to the madness?

Traffic czar Ken Reashor explains the logic behind Halifax's most baffling intersections

BY ANGELA MOMBOURQUETTE | PHOTOS BY TAMMY FANCY/FANCYFREEFOTO.COM

**I**t's just part of living in Halifax—the cursing, the confrontations, the confusion. Every day, as we walk, drive, or bike through this city's weird and wonderful intersections, many of us wonder: “What were those planners thinking?”

Ahsan Habib knows that confusion. He moved to Halifax in January, after five years in Ontario. He says he's had some difficulty adapting to driving here. “I'm dependent on GPS most of the time, because I don't know the streets that well,” he says. “Sometimes it's saying ‘right turn’ but there's not really a right turn to make—more of a right inclination. It's very confusing.”

He's found it particularly challenging to negotiate the poorly marked lane designations at many intersections, and adds it doesn't help that so many of our intersections are way out of alignment. “When you're going straight, you have to make a slight turn to stay in the lane!” he marvels. “It's dangerous.”

Coincidentally, Habib is a transportation engineer and thinks the learning curve for understanding Halifax's traffic design is too steep. “A city should be designed so that everybody can feel comfortable,” he says. “It should not take a learning experience to drive in a city.”

When you want answers, you go to the man in charge. In Halifax, that's Ken Reashor, acting director of HRM's transportation and public works department and the city's Traffic Authority. “Let's go for a little drive together,” I suggested, and he was happy to oblige.

I mapped out a route that would take us through some of the most confounding crossroads on the peninsula, beginning with the infamous Willow Tree intersection at Quinpool and Robie.

It wasn't long before Reashor and I were waiting in traffic a dozen cars deep on Bell Road. Pedestrians were crossing randomly

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as cars came and went in every direction. I waved toward the jumble. "There's too much going on here, don't you think?"

Reashor surprised me. "Yes," he agreed. "We have plans to upgrade this intersection, because it has old equipment, and the pedestrian walk times are not what we would like to see. Plus, there are no good refuges for pedestrians in any location. Our intention is to consider a roundabout. The analysis that we've done, and we've computer-modelled it, is that a two-lane roundabout would, in fact, improve the operation here."

I really shouldn't have been that surprised. After speaking for any length of time, it becomes clear that this man has a thing for roundabouts. He has visions of them popping up at each of the multi-legged intersections around the Common. He has dreams of an efficient single-lane roundabout at Novalea and Devonshire—likely a vast improvement over the existing mishmash of lights and lanes.

However, the thought of a roundabout here, at one of the busiest intersections in Halifax, brought back a flood of Armdale Rotary nightmares. "Doesn't everyone in Halifax freak out when you say the word 'roundabout?'" I asked.

"I don't know if it's everybody in Halifax," he countered, "and I think it's mostly that they don't understand. They're not educated around roundabouts. They have a vision from—I don't know—it could be Europe. Some of the roundabouts there are really high-volume. Or maybe they've experienced the Armdale Rotary and they didn't like it."

That seems highly likely. Even Reashor admitted he'd never seen a traffic circle that worked the way the Rotary had, where the unusual layout and one-on-one protocol meant that drivers could easily enter at 70 kilometres an hour. Modern roundabouts, he pointed out, are significantly safer and designed for low entry speeds. Even I have to concede that Armdale, in its new roundabout configuration, works better than it used to, although I still have some concerns for pedestrian safety. But studies by Transport Canada confirm that roundabouts are much safer than signalized intersections for pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles.

"In your blue-sky scenario, when might this happen?" I asked.



The dogleg intersection at Cunard, Chebucto and Windsor is “terrible,” according to Halifax Traffic Authority Ken Reashor. But he has a plan that should make it safer—if he can just get the funds to implement it.

“I hope there’ll be an opportunity within the next five years.”

So, with visions of vehicles swiftly circling the Willow Tree, I directed us on toward my next pet peeve: the ill-conceived intersection of Chebucto, Windsor and Cunard. We pulled into a convenience store parking lot to better mull this piece of eccentric engineering. “You know what I’m going to say, Ken...”

But Halifax’s traffic guru wasn’t going to fight me on this one. “This is terrible!” he agreed. “The roads are misaligned all over the place, you have this turnaround where you’re going down Windsor and facing a red light, and it’s a pedestrian issue, particularly at the south end, because drivers think they have the right-of-way.”

He wasn’t sure of the history. “I think it just developed as a matter of course. There were probably never any signals when it first came about.” He added that the parking lot we were sitting in was part of the problem. “There was actually an attempt at one point to purchase some of this land,” he explained, “and the owners were very, very reluctant.”

And then, he uttered these magic words: “We do have a plan to try to realign this intersection. I had some survey work done so we could develop a design, and I can tell you that we’ve tried to make this a better, safer route. There will still be a jog, but there will be one signal.”

I believe I heard a chorus of angels. Our Traffic Authority had just acknowledged that this intersection is as crazy as I’d always thought it was. Still, he wasn’t making any promises about when this minor miracle might happen. “If we had the money,” he said, “we’d do it next year. But in order to go forward with this project, we may have to buy this whole site.”

Despite that vague commitment, I was feeling good, but not for long. Our next destination was the intersection of Windsor Street, Bayers Road and Young Street. This intersection pushes many drivers’ buttons. It jogs heavily going east-west and the facing left-turn lanes on Windsor actually overlap one another, creating hazardous conflicts in all directions. But there’s no blaming history for this one: this piece of work was built just a few years ago. “The angles here just don’t work, Ken. This is a head-on collision waiting to happen.”

“It’s an issue,” he admitted. “They wouldn’t allow us to buy the land we needed to do it properly,” he gestured toward the

empty lot adjacent to the intersection, and to a corner lot that houses an apartment building.

“Who wouldn’t? Council?”

“I don’t know. At the end of the day, based on staff’s recommendation, the department did not buy the land they wanted to buy in order to do the design they want to do. I wasn’t here when they purchased the land. I was here when the design went through, and I asked if we could consider going back and trying to get more land. I was told, ‘No.’ So, we’ve got this problem now and we can’t solve it.”

The finality of this statement broke my heart. “So we’re stuck with this?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “What’s done is done.”

I tried to put this thought behind me as we carried on toward the most confounding merge ever designed: the Windsor Street Exchange at Kempt Road.

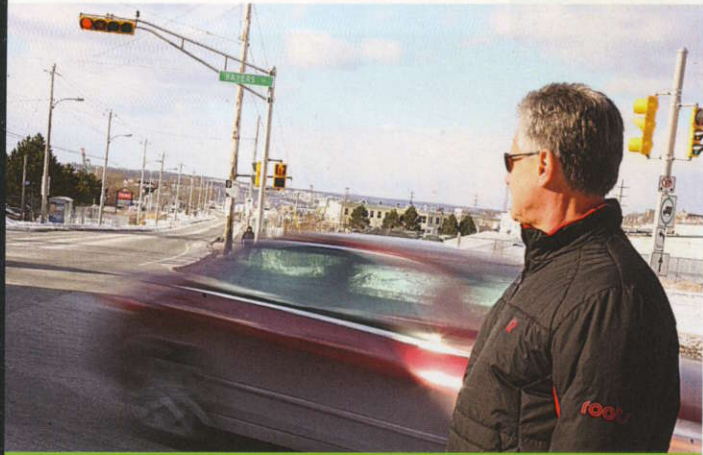
As per my instruction, we turned left at the top of Windsor toward the Fairview Overpass. Within seconds, our lane ended. With only a slight hesitation, Reashor merged left, in sharp contrast with my experience the day before, where I had been forced to stop dead because the steady stream of traffic offered no opportunity to move in.

I wanted him to acknowledge how frustrating this design is, but Reashor wasn’t budging. “When we rebuilt this intersection two years ago, we were trying to build in capacity,” he explained. “The idea is to allow more cars to get through the intersection faster.”

I had an objection: “But drivers don’t have time to merge safely. Are you happy with this?”

“Well, it’s a unique location,” he conceded. “I’ll give you that. But even though the lane drops, it’s signed properly and it does meet all the minimum requirements in terms of merge distance.”

Minimum requirements be damned, a lane that suddenly ends between two other busy lanes doesn’t make sense. But here’s something I didn’t know: “It’s not forever,” Reashor told me. “We were hoping to rebuild this intersection this year, and to extend that merge significantly further, so that you’d actually go down more towards the bridge before having to merge. But we didn’t know about [the Fairview Overpass construction], so we’ve had to postpone our work.”



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—Ken Reashor

We agreed to disagree on this one, but by the time our tour had finished, I felt a bit better. The vast chasm I’d imagined between Halifax’s drivers and the Traffic Authority didn’t seem that enormous anymore. And as Reashor pointed out, there’s a tradeoff for some of the planning problems that come with being an older city. “A city like Calgary was built the way it should be built, but they would love to have streets like these with trees on them,” he said. “Some of the things that don’t meet the standards are the things that give the city character. And it’s that ambience that makes Halifax what it is.” |||

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