

I believe Mother Nature has a strong objection to paved roads existing in Minnesota. Our weather, with its ample moisture and freezing temperatures, is optimized to degrade pavement as quickly as possible. This, of course, leads to the annual blooming of orange cones, detours, and lane closures as road authorities work hard to repair the aftermath of these battles with the elements. As drivers navigate the new crop of road work each year, it can be frustrating to see travel time added to your daily commute or favorite route to your weekend getaway. The temptation is strong to treat the signs and barricades of construction zones as more guidelines than hard and fast rules.

There are a number of reasons disregarding work zone rules is a bad idea, with safety being chief among them. Lane shifts, road closures, and speed limit reductions are all elements of a construction project thoughtfully considered by traffic engineers as they put pen to paper long before the first detour sign ever appears. Benton County Public Works Director Chris Byrd has decades of experience creating and planning for safe work zones on the roads. According to Byrd, “when planning for a road construction project we must consider all of the traffic that is using the road before the work starts. We have to consider what would a typical driver experience as they drive through that work zone, determine how we can inform them of the changing conditions, and then erect the appropriate work zone signage to convey that message. Furthermore, we use cones, barrels, and barricades to separate drivers from danger. Sometimes the danger is not immediately behind the cone, barrel, or barricade. So one cannot assume that if there appears to be no immediate danger, the roadway is safe. Please do not ever assume that the roadway is safe behind a cone, barrel or barricade.”

Detours, barricades, and cones are in place to protect not only the workers on the road project, but those behind the wheel as well. Drivers operate in a world where the road laid out before them can be assumed to be generally free from obstructions and hazards. This is not necessarily true in a work zone. The process of building or repairing pavement can create all kinds of dangers for motorists. When asked to describe the hazards present in a work zone, Byrd stated “a road work zone can be an environment that changes rapidly. The work zone that one drives through during the morning commute can look different in the afternoon commute, as the work progresses. It is important for drivers to remember that conditions can change with very little notice. The best thing a driver can do is eliminate all distractions and be observant to the situation. Look for workers that may be near the lane of traffic. Those workers may be directing traffic in a certain direction, or they may be focused on the construction work and not able to pay attention to traffic. Also give additional distance between yourself and the driver in front of you, in case there is a sudden braking event. Lastly, pay attention to what may be construction traffic and do not follow them into the construction area.”

For those still contemplating taking the risk of disregarding work zone directions, there are significant consequences. First, state law makes it a misdemeanor crime to drive around, damage, or remove barricades or other objects placed by a road authority to close a road. A decision to drive onto a closed portion of a roadway could be a costly shortcut, as misdemeanor crimes are punishable by up to a \$1,000 fine and/or 90 days in jail. Second, state law provides that anyone cited for speeding in a work zone must pay a fine of \$300.00 plus court surcharges. Slowing down is the best way to avoid a crash in a work zone. Slower speeds give you more time to spot and react to people, vehicles, and other objects in your path.

Work zones are full of unexpected hazards. Large equipment, unnavigable sections of roadway, and workers walking about all present challenges not usually seen on the roadways. Getting through a

construction season can be a difficult ride. Slow down and be alert in work zones to help ensure construction season is a safe journey for everyone. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at:
<https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.