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DOT asks for feedback on rest stop closure proposal



Travis K. Fischer
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The Iowa Department of Transportation is considering a plan that would eventually close down more than a quarter of the state's full service rest areas.

Recently the DOT released their initial proposal, based on a comprehensive study of the state facilities over the last several years. In 2013, the Iowa Department of Transportation completed the Iowa Statewide Rest Area Management Plan (IRAMP), a report to be used to make recommendations for the interstate rest area service. Evaluating all of Iowa's rest areas based on a variety of criteria; including usage, age, capacity, and services, the DOT has ranked all of the state's 37 rest areas, giving them an overall score.

"We took on this study back in 2013 to see how the rest areas are utilized," said Andrea Henry, director of strategic communications for the Iowa DOT. "The transportation system has changed since many of these rest areas have been built."

When originally mandated by law, rest stops were required to be placed every 30 minutes. However, time has changed the way people travel, negating the need for as many public rest areas.

"Cars at the time didn't travel

as fast and didn't travel for those distances. That need to break isn't as frequent as it once was," said Henry. "In addition, a lot of private industry has come in and provided a lot of resting opportunities."

Based on the IRAMP evaluations, 11 of the 37 rest areas have been selected for eventual closure. These closures would be in addition to the two rest areas in Waukee, which were recently shutdown during the construction of the Grand Prairie Parkway interchange.

Closures would not happen immediately. Instead, the plan selects rest areas that are nearing the end of their usefulness over the next thirty years. Once a rest area reaches the point it needs to be either rebuilt or demolished, it will be demolished.

"One of the factors that led us to making this schedule is making sure that we are not closing these rest areas until they would require a significant investment," said Henry.

The first on the proposed schedule would be the eastbound rest area on I-80 in Davenport, which would be demolished at some point in the next five years.

Following that, over the next 5-30 years, rest areas in Loveland, Missouri Valley, Sergeant Bluff, Osceola, and Story City would also be phased out and demolished.

With the exception of the southbound Story City and Sergeant Bluff rest stops, the rest stops rec-



ommended for closure fall within the bottom ten of overall ranked stops, and all of the stops recommended for closure fall within the bottom ten in the usage index.

In addition to the full service rest stops, the DOT is also proposing the closure of the state's 16 parking only rest stops. Like the full service stops, these parking only stops would be demolished over the next several years, though at a more accelerated pace.

"The parking only sites, right now, only provide a place to pull off and park," said Henry. "They are very difficult to maintain and there is a safety factor because they are not monitored."

Over the next 15 years, the DOT would phase out parking only stops in Salix, Avoca, Wilton, Osceola, St. Charles, Northwood, Story County Overlook, Mondamin, Minden, and Clear Lake.

By spending \$700,000 to demolish an aging rest area rather

than the \$3.5 million it would take to replace one, the DOT expects to save \$2.8 million per rest stop.

"We would save about \$30,000,000 over the next 20 years," said Henry. "All of those savings would be reinvested into the highway program so that we could use them on other projects."

Some of these projects include development of a network that tracks the available parking spots along the I-80 corridor, giving drivers the ability to check the availability of parking in both public and private rest stops in real time in order to better plan their stops.

Don't expect to see bulldozers along the interstate any time soon though. The plan for eventual demolition is still in the very early stages of development. The DOT is currently soliciting public comment on their website, which will be open through September of 2019.

"After that time, we will look at comments we have received and balance that against the plan we have," said Henry. "This is going to be a long process. We would need some time, at least a year, to gather all that information to come up with a final implementation plan."

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