



After the champagne, for Staten Islanders, it's Chateau Goethals

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Staten Island Advance/Kathryn

PaulsenThis photo was taken last Sunday at the Goethals Bridge at about 3:45 p.m. On Sunday, just as many travelers were returning home to Staten Island after the long Christmas weekend, traffic was backed up over the length of the Goethals. One big reason: two of the bridge's toll lanes were out of service.

If you're planning on celebrating the New Year in New Jersey, just know that there'll be a hangover to contend with: The all-but-certain massive traffic backups on the way home.

Amid holiday traditions like turkey and cranberry sauce, mistletoe, Dick Clark and "Auld Lang Syne" come the tie-ups at the Goethals Bridge and Outerbridge Crossing.

The antiquated bridges themselves are partly to blame, as two narrow Island-bound lanes funnel into the toll plazas. But on three occasions over Christmas weekend, spot checks by the Advance revealed a completely preventable snag that could have speeded up travel for thousands of aggravated drivers.

Each time, drivers found two toll booths were closed, while motorists paying cash waited in long lines to pay at the open booths. The closed booths were found at about 9 p.m. Christmas Eve at the Goethals, about 8 p.m. Christmas night at the Outerbridge and about 4 p.m. Sunday at the Goethals.

A check into the matter by the Port Authority found that toll takers were on breaks at each of those times,

possibly for as long as 20 minutes.

Staffing at the bridges' cash lanes had been increased for the Christmas holiday weekend, due to anticipated heavy levels of traffic.

Of the seven toll lanes at the Outerbridge, three accepted E-ZPass only, and four were manned cash lanes, double the number open on a normal weekday.

The lanes were divided evenly into cash and E-ZPass only at the eight lane toll plaza at the Goethals Bridge. The Goethals typically staffs only three cash lanes on a normal weekday.

While four toll takers are positioned inside the booth, a fifth is on hand to relieve the others during each shift's one-hour meal break, and one other half-hour break.

Ideally, the personnel change is seamless. However, "there could be times when the transition is not as smooth as it should be," and "you might find booths closed down for a short period of time while relief is coming in," said Port Authority spokesman Steve Coleman.

But the closure of even one booth can have a dramatic effect on the toll plaza's ability to process cars.

On a day like Christmas, when an estimated 45,500 drivers crossed the Outerbridge -- about a quarter of them paying cash -- it takes only a few minutes of diminished toll processing capacity to create a standstill, said Jonathan Peters, a finance professor and transportation expert at the College of Staten Island.

Peters and his colleagues at CSI have been studying the effects of traffic at the Outerbridge during times when only two cash booths are in operation. The traffic model they created using the college's supercomputer shows how easily cars back up to the point they block drivers from accessing the E-ZPass lanes.

According to his research, Peters estimates that only about 44 cars can wait to pay at the toll plaza before the traffic levels begin to cause problems.

Given a high volume of traffic with a higher than normal percentage of drivers paying cash because they're visiting from out of town, and "That's the deadly mix," Peters said.

Peters, who recalled seeing closed toll booths during his own past Christmas Eve travels over the Outerbridge, said the authority should not have been caught off guard.

"It happens every year, it's always the same day," Peters said of the crush of holiday traffic. "We know what it looks like, we've seen it repeatedly, and so we should plan for it."

"If it was such a rare event, you could understand it might not be manageable," he said. "But it's a situation that occurs on a regular basis."

Coleman said the authority continuously monitors the level of cash customers waiting at the plaza, and booths can be switched from E-ZPass to cash, and vice versa, as needed to accommodate the traffic.

"We're going to work closely with our toll supervisors to try to eliminate any gaps wherever possible in the transitions for people going out on breaks and when the relief comes in during the New Year's holiday," Coleman said.

The Port Authority is working on devising a cashless tolling system that could someday help alleviate toll plaza bottlenecks altogether, though traffic will still be limited by the two narrow lanes, until both bridges are replaced with more modern spans.

--- *Contributed by Maura Yates*

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