Are roundabouts a boon or nightmare?

Transport experts say they are safe and efficient, but drivers find them confusing

By Tai Suan Chiang

New drivers fear roundabouts while other motorists warn of possible dangers from hesitant users whose actions are hard to anticipate.

But transport experts said roundabouts or traffic circuses are a safe and efficient method of managing traffic.

Roundabouts made the headlines last week when there was speculation that the landmark Newton Circus, built in 1933, could make way for a multi-tiered traffic junction.

Last Wednesday, it was reported that the Land Transport Authority (LTA) is looking to improve traffic flow at the roundabout which serves Clemenceau Avenue and five other roads – Dunearn, Bukit Timah, Newton, Scotts and Keng Lee.

Many motorists whom The Straits Times spoke to said it is a nightmare navigating Newton Circus. Marketing communications manager Janet Ow, 35, said: “I find it confusing as the road markings are not clear, and some impatient drivers will take advantage of less experienced drivers by cutting into their lanes when the latter still have the right of way.”

Associate Professor Chin Hoo Shing Cher, director of the Safety Studies Initiative at Nanyang University of Technology, said: “Roundabouts are safe and efficient, but drivers have to be patient and take their time. At roundabouts as there are few bars, ‘many drivers are nervous about using roundabouts and their hesitation makes it difficult for other drivers to anticipate their movements’,” he added. He noted that some drivers choose the wrong lane and do not signal, leading to confusion among drivers and near-misses or even collisions.

But Associate Professor Gopinath Menon, from Nanyang Technological University’s School of Civil and Environmental Engineering, said roundabouts are safer than cross- or T-junctions. At T-junctions without traffic lights, drivers may find it a challenge to get across several lanes of opposing traffic to reach his desired lanes.

At a roundabout, drivers can join the traffic flow only in one direction. According to an LTA spokesman, roundabouts manage traffic at a location where traffic is moderate and “where multiple roads branch from an intersection.”

Dr Park Byung Joon, head of the Master of Science in Urban Transport Management programme at SIM University, said a roundabout should have only two lanes, an inner one for circulating and the other for vehicles to exit.

The Straits Times, which visited several roundabouts last week, found that motorists had no problems with roundabouts at places such as Serangoon Garden and Amber Road.

But motorists said it is a different situation at the bigger roundabouts, such as the ones at Tuas and Pioneer Circles where buses and container trucks trying to enter the Tuas and Pioneer Circles emerge from nearly all directions.

LTA would not comment on whether more roundabouts would be removed or added in the future. But it noted that as signalised control is often required when traffic volume increases and given that roundabouts require considerable space, they are often not the most suitable solution in land-scarce Singapore.

Motorists are divided on whether traffic circuses should stay or go. Said Mr Robin Goh, 37, an assistant director of communications who works in Sentosa, which has several roundabouts: “They save time as there is no need to wait at the traffic lights.”

Magazine editor Allyson Klass, 37, who got into a small accident at Newton Circus three years ago, felt they should be removed. “We have horrible drivers who either don’t signal or drift in and out of lanes like fighter pilots.”

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There were speculations last week that the landmark Newton Circus, built in 1933, could make way for a multi-tiered traffic junction. ST PHOTO: TED CHEN

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