



Workers from **Oakgrove Construction Inc.** of Elma -- from left, Randy Vogel, Vince Saunders and Walt Putney -- complete a manually controlled ramp gate at the William Street entrance to the Thruway in Cheektowaga as the state seeks to avoid having motorists stranded during snowstorms. Robert Kirkham / Buffalo News

Closing gates on traffic nightmares

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As a classic Buffalo lake-effect storm began dumping 2 feet of heavy, wet snow last December, hundreds of motorists were allowed onto the Thruway -- even though traffic had ground to a halt hours earlier.

They got stranded, some for as long as 17 hours.

Frustrations of the stuck drivers escalated when they saw that one side of the Thruway had been cleared but there was no way for them to cross over to the other side and drive off the highway.

To prevent the Thruway from becoming a nightmare traffic jam again during this snow season, state workers have begun installing manually controlled ramp gates at seven entrance locations on the mainline Thruway and the Niagara Thruway through Buffalo and movable concrete barriers along a 10-mile stretch of the mainline Thruway.

"I think this is a very valuable step that we're taking," said State Police Capt. Michael P. Nigrelli, who is in charge of the Western New York section of the Thruway. "It should help us improve our response to winter storms. ... We'll be better prepared.

"Our readiness level is at a higher level. But it still depends on what Mother Nature should happen to give us."

Manually controlled gates are being placed at several entrances to the Thruway.

È William Street, westbound and eastbound.

È Cleveland Drive, westbound

È Ridge Road, both eastbound on-ramps.

And to the Niagara Thruway at:

È Griswold Street (southbound)

È Smith Street (southbound)

È Washington Street (southbound)

È Louisiana Street (southbound)

Either troopers or Thruway maintenance crews will be able to go to the entrance, close the gate and then proceed to other duties. Previously, the trooper or crew would have had to stay at the location to block vehicles from entering.

Workers also are installing eight movable barriers along the 10-mile nontoll stretch of the Thruway between Interchange 50 (Niagara Falls) and 55 (Route 219/Springville). Crews will be able to move these barriers in the event both sides of the Thruway are shut down.

The total cost of all the gates and barriers is about \$900,000. The gates should be completed by the end of this month, and the barriers are expected to be in place by mid-November.

Many motorists suggested finding a way to move the concrete medians in the middle of the Thruway last December.

By midday Dec. 2, traffic was backed up for about 4 miles on the westbound side from the Niagara Thruway to Walden Avenue and about 5 miles on the eastbound side from the Niagara

Thruway to about the Blasdell off-ramp. Everything in front of those backups had been cleared by plows.

Drivers at the ends of the backups were rescued one by one. Those on the other sides of the cleared roads kept wishing there was a way they could get across from where they were stuck to the cleared side.

The Thruway Authority and the State Police also have worked out a new protocol for shutting down the Thruway. Many people were critical of the Thruway Authority for waiting seven hours before closing the highway to traffic in last season's storm.

The State Police had to wait for permission from Thruway Authority officials in Albany before they were allowed to block entry to the Thruway during the December storm.

Now local officials -- Nigrelli and the head of the Buffalo division of the Thruway Authority -- can make that call.

"We don't have to wait for someone to make that decision," Nigrelli said. "We can start the process of closing the road and proceed forward without delay."

Officials also have worked out agreements with local volunteer fire companies to get their assistance during emergencies on the Thruway.

The storm that snarled the Thruway last Dec. 1-2 was a "classic lake-effect storm," said National Weather Service meteorologist Jon Hitchcock.

He cautioned Western New Yorkers to keep in mind that the worst snows to hit the area tend to be lake-effect, tending to hit between mid-November and early February, when Lake Erie freezes over.

He also warned that "early season lake-effect snow is often wet and heavy," which tends to cause more problems. "A foot of light, fluffy snow is easy to get through," he said.

He recalled the Gridlock Storm of 2000 when 2 feet of heavy snow fell between Nov. 20 and 23. "That was a lot more serious than this past winter," he said, noting that about 100,000 cars were stranded during the storm. "Pretty much everything was snarled," he said.

Hitchcock noted that the timing of the 2000 storm caused much of the problems. "The snow started to fall around 10 or 11 a.m., and by early afternoon, 3 to 4 inches per hour of snow was falling."

Many people noticed how bad the snow was getting, "so everyone tried to leave early." That snarled traffic, particularly in downtown Buffalo.

Other major lake-effect storms over the last decade include an extended storm in February 2007 that dumped 42 inches of snow on East Aurora and a 18-inch snowfall between Dec. 21 and 23 in 2008.

"The thing about [the 2008 storm] is that it had very strong winds with it," Hitchcock said. "If this had happened on a weekday, it absolutely would have snarled traffic. It didn't, so it's not in anybody's memory."

Then, there was the infamous October Surprise snowstorm Oct. 12-13, 2006, which destroyed nearly 60,000 trees still lush with their leaves. The branches were no match for the heavy lake-effect snow, which brought them -- and countless power lines -- down.

Forecasters have been saying there's a chance it'll be colder than normal this year, Hitchcock said. The weather service is releasing its official forecast for the cold season thutoday.

But cold air doesn't necessarily mean bad lake-effect storms.

"The presence of cold air is one of about a dozen factors that contribute to lake-effect snow," Hitchcock assured.

Those factors, he said, include wind direction and moisture.

Hitchcock said it's extremely unlikely that something like the freak October 2006 storm would happen this season.

"We're late enough in the year now," he said. "The leaves have come down enough."