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Roundabout Radical

Bill Baranowski and the untold story of Park City traffic









Traffic engineer Bill Baranowski has designed about 300 roundabouts in the United States. Of the seven he designed for Park City, two were never built. "I won't tell you where," he says during our first conversation.

"Let me ask you a question," I say.

"I won't tell you where those were."

What Park City traffic could have been, and should have been, troubles Baranowski. His roundabouts save lives, while those unbuilt allow preventable tragedies—and cause congestion.

According to the U.S. Federal Highway Administration, changing a traffic light intersection into a roundabout reduces fatal and injury crashes by 78%. Their design makes it difficult for vehicles to hit each other (or pedestrians) with speed. Roundabouts also improve traffic flow.

Baranowski, born in 1961, grew up in the Sugar House neighborhood of Salt Lake City and has run his own consultancy, RoundaboutsUSA, for almost 25 years. He studied civil engineering at the University of Utah and earned a master's degree in transportation from Brigham Young University in 1989.

As a fresh graduate working in southern California, Baranowski visited the "famous" Five Points roundabout in Santa Barbara, designed by Peter Doctors, an OG of the American roundabout movement. That moment of inspiration converted Baranowski to the roundabout cause, which he brought home to Utah.

In 1993, Baranowski proposed Utah's very first roundabout at the entrance to Utah Valley University in Orem. His BYU classmate Ron Mortimer did the design. It was finished in 1994.

Thirty years later, I join Baranowski for a roundabout tour of Park City. We start at Wendy's in Kimball Junction. The roundabout at Ute Boulevard and Uinta Way is his. So is the one at Newpark Boulevard and Uinta Way.

Everything in a Baranowski roundabout is purposeful. The Wendy's roundabout has a drivable "truck apron" along the inner circle to accommodate semi-trucks. It also has slanted curbs to ensure that plow trucks don't catch their blades. The pedestrian crosswalks—"ped crossings" in traffic engineer lingo—intentionally zigzag, forcing pedestrians to look where a car may appear.

We get in Baranowski's white Subaru Forester to tour the roundabout at Ute and Landmark by Walmart. It is not a Baranowski. "That one is so ugly," he says. z

Neither is the roundabout at Olympic Parkway and Landmark, which he considers "kind of boring." He makes it interesting, though, by unexpectedly driving onto the truck apron, to show that any car can do it. Baranowski uses his turn signals in roundabouts—and wants everyone to do likewise. We should also use our horns more often, he believes.

Baranowski and his wife have three children, ages 11, 14, and 16. "They've been through a lot of roundabouts," he says. Do they tease him? "No, they get mad if I go around more than one time." They would have been quite mad during our drive.

We visit the roundabout at the entrance to Outlets Park City (soon to be Junction Commons), the first that Baranowski ever designed. He proposed and planned many before designing his own. The roundabout connecting the two sections of the outlets is his, too.

"We're gonna see the mothership," Baranowski says as we return to 224. It's time for one of his signature projects: the award-winning roundabout at Deer Valley Drive and Marsac Avenue, built for the 2002 Olympics.

We park at City Hall and survey the roundabout from above the stone walls on the southeast side of the roundabout.

"Nobody's using their blinkers," he says. "That makes me sad."

Finally, someone signals.

"Ah, look at that. Alright. Someone knows what they're doing."

Originally, the Marsac roundabout had two lanes, which confused people. In 2008, Baranowski reduced it to one lane but added a "turbo" lane, separated by a concrete island, that allows westbound traffic from Deer Valley Drive to pass through without yielding. "Nobody tried that in the USA until I did it," he says.

Returning towards Kimball Junction on Deer Valley Drive, Baranowski turns right on Bonanza to show me a secret he wouldn't divulge when we first spoke: the unbuilt roundabout he designed for the intersection of Bonanza, Monitor, and Kearns.

The issue was space; a roundabout takes up more area than a traffic signal. "That's a problem here by the cemetery," Baranowski says. Someone in government was unwilling to disturb the dead for the sake of the living.

Baranowski's other unrealized roundabout was meant to be at a hotel near Park City Mountain Resort, where the Shadow Ridge condos now stand.

In the long run, Baranowski's roundabouts seem to get built. In 2000, he proposed one at the entrance to the State Capitol on State Street in Salt Lake City. Construction on it will begin this October.

"It took 24 years for this," he says. "That's called planning ahead, or maybe saving the best for last."

Baranowski takes the Wendy's roundabout back to my car. I drive I-80 eastbound and pass the roundabout under construction at Route 40 and Silver Summit Parkway. It's not a Baranowski, but hopefully it will save lives, and save the living from sitting in traffic.