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Fiery crash chars bridge, snarls roads

Travelers, commuters stew for hours in backups

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The tanker truck explosion that closed Interstate 95 yesterday afternoon forced thousands of commuters and long-distance travelers onto clogged alternate routes, where they crept through hourlong backups, missed afternoon flights and got lost on unfamiliar roads.

Two southbound lanes of I-95 reopened at 7 p.m., and state highway workers were laboring through the night in a "marathon effort" to open the northbound side by this morning, officials said.

After waiting for emergency workers and police investigators to finish their jobs, road crews had to clear fire-retardant foam before they could survey the damage to the highway.

Initial reports indicated that the road was in good shape, but officials were unsure about the condition of the Interstate 895 bridge over I-95, which could have been weakened by the fire.

"The bridge is charred, so we have to look for any evidence of damage to the structural elements - the reinforcing [rods] in the concrete and the steel beams," said State Highway Administrator Neil J. Pedersen.

Late yesterday evening, state police said the I-895 overpass was in good condition and that the southbound lanes would be reopened by 1 a.m.

When the southbound lanes of I-95 reopened, officials lined the median with large state trucks to block the view of the accident scene and prevent rubbernecking. But with the interstate closed in both directions for four hours, many of the nearly 200,000 motorists who travel the section south of Baltimore each day found themselves with plenty of time behind the wheel to watch the smoke billowing from the accident site.

"It's a huge disaster for traffic, shutting down I-95 just before rush hour," said Eileen Singleton, senior transportation engineer at the [Baltimore Metropolitan Council](#). "I-95 is a major truck route and a major commuting route," linking downtown Baltimore workplaces with the bedroom communities of Howard County.

Delays could have been much worse. Amtrak and light rail trains were not affected. Many downtown workers heard of the fire before leaving their offices yesterday afternoon and found other routes home, leaving the interstate to those just passing through or visiting Baltimore for the day.

Audrey Suhr, 60, of Elkridge got on I-95 South about 4 p.m., after taking out-of-town cousins to the National Museum of Dentistry in Baltimore. At 6 p.m., she still wasn't home.

"We made the best of it," she said. "We turned on some classical music. We told stories. We didn't sing, but we might



have."

Suhr didn't complain about the delay. "When you hear that people have been killed," she said, "it's pretty hard to be inconvenienced."

As backups on the interstate stretched to more than 10 miles, police redirected traffic onto a dozen other roads to avoid the fire scene. Northbound motorists were sent via Route 100 to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway while southbound drivers mostly exited at Interstate 195.

State police Sgt. Sylvia Wright said one of the biggest jobs for police was preventing accidents among thousands of impatient drivers detoured onto unfamiliar roads.

Grace Bergerson, a cashier at a Royal Farms Store on Washington Boulevard in Halethorpe, said confused travelers streamed in all evening asking directions.

"People are asking me how to get to Washington, how to get to Pennsylvania, how to get everywhere," she said. "We're selling a lot of maps."

People headed for [Baltimore-Washington International Airport](#) found themselves steaming in gridlock as their planes took off.

Teresa Leming-Hart, 44, and her son Andy Hail, 22, missed their American Airlines flight home to Oklahoma City by five minutes. Their shuttle trip from Bethesda to the airport took almost three hours.

Leming-Hart said the shuttle driver knew about the crash but was convinced it would still be quickest to use I-95. He gave up at Route 175.

"Everyone on the shuttle bus was anxious and annoyed," she said. "The interstate was just a parking lot."

Once detours were in place, commuters said the trip home wasn't all that terrible. T.J. Klement's ride from Burtonsville to [Charles Village](#) in Baltimore usually takes about 40 minutes.

Yesterday, he left his job as a photo processor at 4 p.m. and got on I-95 north. He was detoured onto Route 100 East and then to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. He got home about 5:30 - more than double the length of a normal trip.

"I've seen it worse so many times," said Klement, 27. "For being closed and everything, it wasn't that bad."

The accident may have helped officials test new disaster response plans developed after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, said Hani S. Mahmassani, a professor at the [University of Maryland, College Park](#) who studies traffic systems.

He said local, state and federal agencies in the Baltimore-Washington area have worked to coordinate their response to emergencies.

"That kind of communication effort was likely being triggered today," he said. "I'm relatively optimistic of the fact that those guys are on the ball."

Commuters and commercial drivers were not the only ones forced to reconfigure travel routes. Area hospitals were forced to consider the detour in plans to transport patients or transplant organs, though they did not expect it to cause serious problems or delays.

"If we were going to bring someone in from South Baltimore, we might consider using a different route or look at bringing in a helicopter," said James J. Scheulen, administrator of emergency medicine at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Eric Sheppard, 47, took a circuitous route to his Elkridge home from his job in Abington - a trip that usually takes 55 minutes. He took I-95 south from Harford County to the Baltimore Beltway, but when traffic backed up he bailed onto

back roads and eventually followed Johnnycake Road into Howard County.

"It took me an hour and 20 minutes, but that's better than three to four hours" people spent on I-95, he said. Years of living and working in different parts of Baltimore honed Sheppard's navigational skills, he said. "I'm from this area originally. I knew where I was going. If I was in another city I probably wouldn't have had a choice."

Doreen DeSa, 45, of Avalon, near the accident scene, said she took back roads to pick up her son, Phillip Arpa, at his school in Baltimore. He was scheduled to have a saxophone lesson in [Annapolis](#) later in the afternoon.

"I think we're going to have to cancel," DeSa said.

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