

# False summits abound in quest for true US 31 highway



A car drives beneath a bridge that is part of the new U.S. 31 as it travels on State Road 4 Friday, Jan. 25, 2013. The bypass in Kokomo is expected to open before Thanksgiving Day. (Truth Photo By Jennifer Shephard)

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When I used to hike mountains, there was a term my fellow hikers and I would use when we thought we saw the top of the trail. Were we looking at the peak or was it a “false summit”? When we got to the top, or what we thought was the top, sometimes we realized the trail continued. The true summit was another mile or two uphill. Usually a discussion ensued over whether we had gone far enough. We always convinced ourselves to keep going because the true end would be worth it.

In about two weeks, Gov. Mike Pence is going to cut the ribbon on a new, limited-access, stoplight-free, highway around Kokomo. I am going to be there. And I am going to celebrate, even though I know it is just a false summit. The real accomplishment is still a ways in the distance.

About 15 years ago, the Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Commerce of St. Joseph County began planning how to make U.S. 31 a true freeway connection between South Bend and Indianapolis. Our organizations were the founding members of the U.S. 31 Coalition, which now has many members along the entire highway, all working toward the same goal.

By working together, our coalition has met the dream of a true highway bypass around Kokomo. No more stoplights. No more cross streets or curb cuts. No more driveways. This dream will be reality before Thanksgiving. When we travel the new U.S. 931 on the east side of Kokomo, we will avoid 15 stoplights, eight intersections, 27 T-intersections, 61 residential driveways, 107 commercial driveways and two railroad crossings. Hallelujah.

But that is not the summit we seek. This time next year, the governor will be cutting a ribbon on a new freeway between Plymouth and South Bend. This new limited-access road will avoid four stoplights, 18 intersections, 41 T-intersections, 330 residential driveways and 135 commercial driveways.

And that is still not the summit. Keep climbing until this time in 2015. The governor will cut the ribbon on a Hamilton County project, which will eliminate 12 stoplights, 17 intersections, 12 T-intersections, 20 residential driveways and 15 commercial driveways.

Are we at the top? Not yet. Our goal is to get on the U.S. 20 Bypass, slow down at the on-ramp to the new U.S. 31, resume the cruise control, and not touch the brake until we reach I-465 in Indianapolis. That is the summit we seek.

Thanks to the three main projects along U.S. 31, we will eliminate 824 dangerous conflicts toward our goal. But we can't stop now. The remaining unimproved sections of U.S. 31 contain seven stoplights, 79 intersections, 26 T-intersections, 212 residential driveways, 44 commercial driveways and two railroad crossings. All these conflicts are hazardous to safe travel.

We will continue to urge state lawmakers that they must not stop with the three big projects. U.S. 31 is not finished until we benefit from the same freeway transportation that other parts of the state enjoy. Businesses tell us they will not consider new expansion and new jobs until U.S. 31 is a real highway.

Our region is the second largest economic engine in the state. We deserve a safe connection to the No. 1 engine. Elkhart County leads the state in job growth and GDP growth. We deserve a true link to the state capital.

Join us in urging our state government not to rest on the false summit. We deserve to reach the top.