

Faster plan - with a hitch

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As the state prepares to work on the final stretches of the massive \$1.1 billion Indianapolis-to-South Bend upgrade of U.S. 31 this spring, concentrating on Carmel and Westfield areas, Gov. Mitch Daniels thinks he can get the work done faster and cheaper.

In a plan announced Wednesday, Daniels wants to use some creative financing to save an estimated \$50 million and strategic road closures to accelerate the project in Hamilton County, with completion in three years.

For motorists, that means potentially closing all four lanes of the highway in Carmel from the Monon Trail south to at least 116th Street.

"This is the right way to do it," said Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard, who endorsed the idea. "The state is going to save tens of millions of dollars this way. It's just so much cheaper to build when you don't have to maintain traffic. And it's much safer for the work crews."

Daniels' plan also seeks to save money by lumping all the remaining highway contracts into one major contract under a public-private partnership.

Announced several years ago as part of his Major Moves project list, the U.S. 31 upgrade will convert the four-lane, divided highway from a congested one with traffic lights to a free-flowing freeway, replacing intersections with interchanges.

Work began about four years ago in the South Bend and Kokomo areas, including what amounts to a second Kokomo bypass under construction a few miles east of the first bypass.

And the state is nearing completion of a new Ind. 38 interchange north of Westfield. Much of that work was done last year.

But beginning this spring, work begins on one of the most congested segments at 146th Street, between Greyhound Pass and the Monon Trail overpass, an area that includes the commercially congested Village Park Plaza area and Clay Terrace Mall.

The work, parts of which are under way, has a \$35.8 million price tag and zeros in on the area just south of the 146th Street bridge. New ramps and road expansion are planned, temporarily closing access to Keystone Parkway, likely beginning in April, in order to build ramp bridges connecting U.S. 31 and 146th Street.

Next year, the work is to move north of the bridge to 151st Street. A line of businesses on the west side of U.S. 31 will be wiped out to make way for the new interchange.

In the end, 146th Street will be served by a diamond interchange.

Over the next few years, an estimated \$578 million worth of work is planned along U.S. 31 from I-465 through Carmel and north to Ind. 32 in Westfield.

Before Daniels' announcement, the expected completion date was 2018. With this plan, it could be done by 2015.

Will Wingfield, a spokesman for the Indiana Department of Transportation, said that although the numbers are not finalized, state taxpayers will benefit.

"We estimate by doing this with one contract, we can see an estimated \$50 million in savings," Wingfield said.

Daniels, in a speech Wednesday at the Purdue Road School, an annual gathering of traffic engineers and transportation officials, said he wants the project end date to be bumped up by about three years.

To do it, he plans to use a public-private partnership strategy, or contractor financing, to essentially bundle the Carmel and Westfield projects, estimated to cost about \$475 million, into one massive bid in an effort to take advantage of current low interest rates and to attract potentially lower bids.

In May 2011, Daniels signed into law a bill that would allow expanded use of private capital for transportation improvements, Wingfield said. Using this new law, INDOT says it will bundle the various phases into a single contract and then "repay the contractor over seven to 10 years using state and federal transportation resources."

For the estimated 45,000 motorists who drive under 146th Street every day (a number that is projected to grow to 62,000 per day by 2035), there is a catch. Under this plan, INDOT is looking into closing U.S. 31 to all traffic so that an overpass at 126th Street and roundabout interchanges at Main and other intersections can be built faster.

Such a closure would send state and local drivers looking for a way around the cone zone. State traffic will be detoured down the city-owned Keystone Parkway to I-465. Local traffic could use one of two parallel bypasses: Pennsylvania Street to the east and the soon-to-be extended Illinois Street bypass to the west. (Illinois now stretches from 136th Street to a dead-end just south of 116th Street. Plans call for it to be extended south to 96th Street.)

Brainard said he thinks most Carmel residents will gladly put up with the highway closure in exchange for the project getting done quicker.

Facing a long stretch of cone zones, officials at Clay Terrace Mall said they would be proactive, keeping their shoppers informed of traffic issues through Facebook and other media.

"We're working closely with the state and the city to ensure all shoppers and mall employees are aware of any closures and detours," said Barbara Schick, general manager of the mall, on the southwest corner of 146th Street and U.S. 31.

"We're sure the minor inconvenience of the spring and summer construction project will be well worth the results, which will ease congestion in the area."

On Twitter, many agreed.

"Chaos comes to mind, but I'm sure we'd survive the hassle," Blake Facey, a Carmel resident, said on his Twitter page.

Such a major highway closure is similar to the Hyperfix project several years ago when the state shut down the I-70/I-65 segment near Downtown Indianapolis to rebuild that highway. In that project, commuters adjusted, the state saved money, and the contractor finished earlier than expected.

Wingfield said the state is not considering a similar closure at Ind. 32 in Westfield because there are no good detour routes. Traffic is likely to be maintained when that intersection is upgraded.

Once completed, the U.S. 31 project is expected to cut a half-hour off travel time between Indianapolis and South Bend, reduce congestion, improve safety and provide a continuity of commerce and regional travel for a U.S. highway that stretches from Michigan to Alabama.

Call Star reporter Dan McFeely at (317) 444-6253.

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Blake Facey, a Carmel resident

THE GOVERNOR'S PLAN

Close all four lanes of a portion of U.S. 31 to expedite road updates and save the state money.

The impact

Motorists in Carmel would have to find a way around the closure

THE IMPACT

Motorists traveling near Carmel would have to take a bypass around the construction area.

What's next

Indiana Department of Transportation officials will have a public meeting from 5 to 8 p.m. March 29 at Carmel High School to give more details about the U.S. 31 construction project.