

New US 31 bypass opens to travelers in Kokomo

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(Photo: Matt Kryger / The Star)

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KOKOMO, Ind. – A new U.S. 31 bypass that circumvents stoplight-plagued Kokomo opened Tuesday, just in time to give Thanksgiving holiday travelers a faster commute between Indianapolis and South Bend.

The \$155 million, 13-mile stretch that allows travelers to avoid 15 traffic lights through the north-central Indiana city opened after crews removed the last barricades blocking its interchanges.

The bypass' opening came a few hours after Gov. Mike Pence, Kokomo Mayor Greg Goodnight and other officials took part in a ceremonial ribbon cutting at which Pence proclaimed that the highway segment about 60 miles north of Indianapolis had opened "just in time for the Thanksgiving travel holiday."

The new bypass replaces the previous U.S. 31 Kokomo bypass, which has been renamed State Road 931. That bypass had opened in 1952 but eventually became lined with stoplights that created traffic backups.

"This is something like 'Back to the Future,'" said Fred Hakes, a Brownsburg resident who commutes once a week to IU-Kokomo as a part-time instructor. "I remember in the '70s ... I could drive from the south side of South Bend to the north side of Indianapolis in just a little over two hours.

"Now that travel is more than 2½ hours," he told The Indianapolis Star.

Indiana Department of Transportation spokesman Will Wingfield said the agency estimates the new bypass will cut travel time between Indianapolis and South Bend by about a half-hour. It should also make the commute through the Kokomo area safer since there won't be as many intersections for motorists to stop and start along, Wingfield said.

Motorist using the new bypass will ramp off of the old U.S. 31 and loop around Kokomo's east side, cutting through farmland that was purchased for the project.

The new stretch also includes five new interchanges to replace the 15 stoplights and an estimated 130 other access points in Kokomo.

A new 20-mile stretch of U.S. 31 south of South Bend is expected to open in about a year. Improvements also are being made to the highway through the northern Indianapolis suburbs of Carmel and Westfield.