

Now let's finish US 31

The sooner work begins on the final 70 miles of U.S. 31, the sooner we can stop wasting time and start creating jobs.



(Photo supplied)

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Thirty-one stoplights down, seven to go — along with 105 intersections, 256 driveways and two railroad crossings.

We can't stop until, as one lawmaker said, "we can set our cruise control in South Bend and not need to touch it until we get to ... Indianapolis."

A 20-mile section of divided, four-lane highway officially opened last week between South Bend and Plymouth on U.S. 31. The new road bypasses a pair of small towns — Lakeville and LaPaz — shaving **about 10 minutes** off that leg of the trip to Indy.

A bypass around the east side of Kokomo opened in November. That 13-mile stretch trimmed another 20 to 30 minutes off the trip. And a 13-mile section of new road in Hamilton County, north of Indianapolis, opens in 2015.

Put it all together, and the 46 miles of improved highway get rid of 31 stoplights, 668 driveways and two rail crossings. But that's not enough.

John Letherman, president of the Elkhart County Council, pointed out that the improvements still leave **70 miles of U.S. 31 untouched** — and that means motorists still encounter 105 intersections, 256 driveways and two railroad crossings along those 70 miles.

Letherman also heads the U.S. 31 Coalition, whose goal is converting the road to a freeway-grade arterial highway all the way to Indianapolis. The coalition estimates that by eliminating driveways and congestion, the project will **prevent 2,600 accidents** and 12 fatalities a year — rates 2.5 higher than the state average.

Reduced travel times will also generate \$5.3 billion in savings over 30 years, the coalition estimates.

A safe, uninterrupted U.S. 31 can help spur economic development even a few miles away, in Elkhart County. But we'll never completely realize those economic benefits or save as many lives as possible without improving those last 70 miles of roadway.

The U.S. 31 Coalition continues to lobby state lawmakers and the Indiana Department of Transportation for funding to upgrade all 122 miles of highway, which could cost an additional \$800 million. Major Moves provided the \$722 million the Kokomo, South Bend-Plymouth and Hamilton County sections.

Gov. Mike Pence **pledged in early 2013** to support funding to complete U.S. 31. With the state sitting on more than \$2 billion in cash reserves, the time is now.

The U.S. 31 Coalition is already working with communities along the last 70 miles of unimproved highway, helping them shape plans that make sense locally. So there's no reason to delay.

The sooner work begins on the final 70 miles of U.S. 31, the sooner we can stop wasting time and start creating jobs. But in this case, time doesn't only cost money — it also costs lives.

Letherman authored the quote about putting the car on cruise control in South Bend and never touching the brakes until reaching Indianapolis. Until last week, it was jU.S.t a dream.

Now it's a possibility.