

Portion of U.S. 31 job ahead of schedule

Indianapolis Star - Indianapolis, Ind.

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Date: Jan 13, 2010

Gov. Mitch Daniels announced Tuesday that work on U.S. 31 in Kokomo would be finished in 2013, two years ahead of schedule.

That part of the 47-mile Major Moves project is being accelerated to take advantage of lower construction prices created by the recession and to put more people to work sooner.

But Hamilton County officials worry about the timeline on their \$600 million, 13-mile portion of the project, which is scheduled to begin in 2011 and end in 2018.

The mayors of Westfield and Carmel have talked with state officials, who indicated that portions of the project in Hamilton County might start later than anticipated because of a crunch in Major Moves funds but would still be finished by 2018.

Westfield Mayor Andy Cook said Daniels' announcement to the U.S. 31 Coalition, a group of residents, companies and elected officials dedicated to upgrading U.S. 31, was a sign that the overall project is a high priority. He said Westfield and Carmel have been preparing campaigns to encourage the state to start all the work on time. That would let Hamilton County start reaping economic-development and commuting benefits sooner.

"We don't want any of it to be moved back," Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard said.

The state is spending about \$1.2 billion to turn U.S. 31 into an interstate-quality, limited-access highway for the 122 miles from Indianapolis to South Bend. It estimates work on the 31 interchanges, mainly in Hamilton County, Kokomo and South Bend, will save travelers 30 minutes.

Daniels' spokeswoman, Jane Jankowski, said construction on the entire project is at or ahead of schedule and that the state has reaffirmed its financial commitment to upgrading U.S. 31 from I-465 to Ind. 38 in Hamilton County.

Indiana Department of Transportation spokesman Will Wingfield said the state is committed to starting on the interchange with Ind. 38 in 2011 and the interchanges at 146th and 151st in 2012. Beyond that, he said, the Hamilton County work has a draft schedule that will be formalized in phases as the project progresses.

Wingfield said the state began buying rights of way in Hamilton County in 2009 and is 30 percent finished with engineering designs there.

Work on the estimated \$300 million, 14-mile project in Kokomo and the estimated \$350 million, 20-mile project in South Bend began in 2008. South Bend is on target to finish in 2014.

Wingfield said finishing the project early in Kokomo will save money. He pointed to low construction costs resulting from the economic downturn, but he wasn't sure how much that could save. The project is being bid in sections.

Wingfield cited the interchange at Ind. 4 in South Bend as one of the most dramatic examples of savings. It had been estimated to cost \$43 million but was awarded in August for \$25 million.

U.S. 31 in Kokomo, created as a downtown bypass, also has become congested during the past 60 years as retailers moved there.

Craig Newkirk, 51, Noblesville, hopes the upgrade shortens his 45-minute commute to Delphi in Kokomo. He thinks it also will make the commute to Indianapolis jobs more realistic for many who have been laid off around Kokomo.

Dennis E. Faulkenberg, executive director of the U.S. 31 Coalition, said accelerating the schedule is an important move.

He said the Indianapolis and South Bend metropolitan areas are two of the largest economic markets in the state, and the highway between them is a major truck-shipping corridor.