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Despite glitches, officials say U.S. 31 bypass will open in late 2013

By Scott Smith Tribune staff writer

The heavy rainfall early last week left a mark on the low-lying area just south of Jerome, where the Wildcat Creek often spills its banks.

That area, which is usually the first place in Howard County to flood, was flooded again last week, after another year went by without a cleanup of a massive, flood-exacerbating logjam.

But the rain-swollen, jammed-up creek aside, there's plenty of optimism over the U.S. 31 Kokomo Corridor project, which state officials say is both ahead of schedule and well under budget.

It's been a whirlwind of activity along the corridor this construction season, as state officials and contractors continue to expect a late 2013 opening of the new 13-mile roadway, said Harry Maginity, with the Indiana Department of Transportation.

The big news on the corridor was the awarding last week of a \$14.1 million contract to Walsh Construction, Chicago, for the stretch between the new Ind. 26 interchange and the Howard/Tipton County Line.

That leaves only two of 11 contracts still to be "let," as transportation officials refer to a contract being awarded.

Originally scheduled for completion in 2015, the Major Moves-funded project is coming in quicker than anticipated and well under the original estimates, which were all made before the 2008 economic meltdown.

For the most recent contract, nine companies submitted bids, with Walsh coming in lowest. Walsh also holds the biggest contract on the project, the \$60 million Contract 8, which includes 4 miles of mainline roadway and the interchange at U.S. 35/Ind. 22.

Traffic along the 35/22 corridor was rerouted to the outside lanes this week as work continues on the corridor, and 300 East was also expected to be reopened.

Three contracts — including the Boulevard interchange and the bridges taking county roads 200 South and 50 North over the new bypass — are complete.

And six other contracts have either been let or are under way.

One of the six contracts — for the bridge carrying 200 North (Morgan Street) over the new bypass — is almost finished, but contractors Crider & Crider Contractors have yet to start work on two of those contracts: the Touby Pike interchange and Contract 11.

Contract 11 will encompass three different environmental mitigation projects, which are mandated by the state to make up for some of the environmental damage the new roadway will cause.

The biggest of the three projects is a channel clearing of a stretch of the Little Wildcat Creek near Center Road, just west of the current U.S. 31. The other two projects involve clearing the logjam at Jerome, which is turning a large area upstream into a swamp, and building an artificial wetland near the Touby Pike interchange with some of the peat soil excavated from the new bypass.

Much of that bog soil is coming from the area between Sycamore Road and Morgan Street. For Contract 1c, the bridge carrying 200 North over the new bypass, contractors are expected to excavate 106,000 cubic yards of peat.

Because the area is so boggy, and the new construction is settling, contractors have already had to make repairs to the newly laid approaches east and west of the new 200 North bridge.

Work crews will wait until spring to install the top layer on the roadway, Maginity said.

The contracts still under design are at the very southern and northern ends of the 13-mile corridor.

Contract 7 will encompass the new configuration where the realigned north split of U.S. 35 will join the new bypass.

And Contract 4b will take the road from the Howard/ Tipton county line to a point just south of Tipton County Road 600 North.

Originally contracts 4a and 4b were going to be bid as one contract, but 4a is ready to go, while 4b is still under design.

Despite some glitches — the biggest being the design flaw on the 50 North bridge, which required demolishing a newly installed bridge deck and reinstalling a stronger structure — Maginity said the state is pleased with the progress to date.

“This is an easy build, going through cornfields, but we’re ahead of schedule,” Maginity said. “We started Kokomo at the same time as the South Bend project, but we’re going to finish in 2013 and they’re going to finish in 2014.”