

## U.S. 31 upgrade to Indy: ‘Going gangbusters’



*A car drives beneath a bridge that is part of the new U.S. 31 as it travels on State Road 4 Friday, Jan. 25, 2013. Work is progressing on the project to create a four lane stretch south to Indianapolis. (Truth Photo By Jennifer Shephard)*

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A quicker, safer drive to Indianapolis is coming — sooner than expected.

Work started in September 2008 on the U.S. 31 upgrade between South Bend and Indianapolis, and Elkhart County boosters received a new injection of enthusiasm last week after Gov. Mike Pence offered his words of support for the project. Couple that with new timelines that have part of the work ending sooner than expected and they’re practically ecstatic.

“Some of these things are just going gangbusters,” said John Letherman, president of the U.S. 31 Coalition and a member of the Elkhart County Council.

U.S. 31 doesn’t actually enter Elkhart County, but it passes through South Bend and it’s the main north-south conduit for Elkhart County traffic headed to the state capital. Accordingly, local leaders like Letherman and Kyle Hannon, president of the Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce, have [long touted the U.S. 31 upgrade plans as vitally important](#).

“It’s remarkable in that the highway doesn’t even touch us, but we use it,” said Hannon.

### ‘THE CONNECTING PORTIONS’

The most recent boost of enthusiasm stems from an address by Pence to the U.S. 31 Coalition at a luncheon on Jan. 15 in Indianapolis. The governor, Hannon said, pledged his support for the ongoing upgrades and improvements, down the road, for the U.S. 31 segments not impacted by the current work.

As is, a 20-mile segment south of South Bend, a 13-mile section around Kokomo and a 13-mile stretch north of Indianapolis are receiving improvements. But the ultimate goal of the U.S. 31 Coalition is to improve the entire 122-mile stretch from the capital to northern Indiana, including

the gaps between the three sections that are currently the focus of the work.

“It’s time to start thinking seriously about the connecting portions,” said Hannon.

Funding has not yet been committed for additional U.S. 31 work, and that’s not likely to be cheap, perhaps \$800 million, thinks Dennis Faulkenberg, executive director of the U.S. 31 coalition. But Pence’s comments give the boosters cause for hope.

## WHERE THINGS STAND

U.S. 31 is a four-lane divided highway much of the way south of South Bend to the northern outskirts of Indianapolis. But there are roads and highways that cross the highway, stoplights (notably in Kokomo) and businesses that have entry points onto the roadway.

The upshot of it all is slower and more dangerous traffic flow along U.S. 31, and the aim of the ongoing work is to convert the roadway, little by little, into a freeway-grade arterial. Fewer roads will cross U.S. 31 and others will be accessible to the highway only via on- and off-ramps, allowing for the removal of stoplights and a reduction in the threat of collisions.

The ongoing work has a price tag of just over \$800 million, according to Faulkenberg, with the funds coming from proceeds of the 2006 lease of Indiana Toll Road operations, federal sources and other state sources. Here’s a closer look at what’s being done right now:

- Around South Bend: Much of the 20-mile section south of South Bend to Plymouth is being built on a new corridor, not visible to the general public. “You can’t really see most of it because most of it is off the existing 31 (corridor),” said Letherman.

That segment is to be complete and opened to traffic by the end of 2014.

- Kokomo: A 13-mile corridor is being built east of the current U.S. 31 loop around Kokomo, which will allow motorists to bypass the many stoplights through the city. The work there is to be done by the end of 2013.

- Hamilton County: Overpasses are being added to reduce problematic intersections and the work on the northern outskirts of Indianapolis around Carmel is to be done in 2015. According to the original timeline, the work was to be done by 2018.