

New U.S. 31 Project Continues to Move Ahead, Despite Economic Concerns

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It's one of the most long-awaited highway projects in recent Hoosier history, the Major Moves U.S. 31 upgrade. The new interstate will connect South Bend to Indianapolis, bypassing small towns that slow traffic.

Wednesday night, the Elkhart Chamber of Commerce hosted its annual transportation meeting. U.S. 31's progress was the topic of discussion.

Two months ago, ground was broken on the new U.S. 31; but with a downed economy, some fear legislative budget priorities could shift and take priority away from U.S. 31.

At tonight's chamber meeting, officials with the U.S. 31 coalition tried to calm those fears, and update folks on the progress.

While most dirt moving won't start until the spring of 2009, earth is being moved in rural Lakeville.

"It's about a mile off 31, so it's not where most people see it where they drive. They will begin driving pilings in the next month to bridge work along the way," says Dennis Faulkenberg, Executive Director of the U.S. 31 Coalition.

Despite the progress, Faulkenberg says project supporters must stay vigilant because there's still a long road ahead, with tough economic challenges.

The good news, the project's one-point-two billion dollars in funding is in the bank.

"There is no doubt in my mind it's going to happen, what we want to do is protect right-away, promote economic development up and down corridor and protect the funding we've got so it doesn't leak away to some other part of state," says John Letherman, President of the U.S. 31 Coalition.

And although counties like Elkhart may not sit on U.S. 31, their companies make a lot of things that travel 31. "We make things here, we have to bring in raw materials, manufacture and ship it out, so the highway system is critical to our success in Elkhart county," adds Letherman.

And from Elkhart to Indianapolis, many businesses are hoping the new U.S. 31 will continue to push forward, even as costs go up and state and federal transportation funds are harder to come by.

“There’s jobs in building roads, it helps local economy to have construction projects going, the ease of transportation will help with commerce throughout the state,” says Beth Acosta, with Elkhart’s Manchester Tank. Acosta represented her company at the Elkhart Chamber meeting.

The Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) continues to complete land acquisitions as they move forward on this project. In light of the troubled economy, coalition officials say it’s been easier for INDOT to buy up land from people that live along U.S. 31.

Assuming things stick to the schedule, the new U.S. 31 project could be complete by 2016.