

Bridges to somewhere

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After an infamous beginning that left it floundering like an endangered fish out of water, and led to the News-Times publishing its now infamous photo (infamous among project leaders, that is) of the "bridge to nowhere," things are moving and shaking - literally - in the U.S. Highway 20 Pioneer Mountain to Eddyville project.

Delays for travelers on Hwy 20 are proving somewhat nettlesome at times, but each delay is actually another step toward the much-anticipated completion of the project. One piece of the overall puzzle fell into place sooner than expected as the Elk City Bridge opened well ahead of schedule , beating the Aug. 3 projection by more than two weeks.

Now Project Manager Joe Squire and Assistant Project Manager Eric Knapp from the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) are at the halfway point looking ahead to the 2011 finish line with enthusiasm and confidence.

The project has three parts: the middle, which is the section currently under construction (and the only one under contract and funded), the eastern end access near Sam's Creek Road, and the western end access near Eddyville. It shaves about four miles off the old alignment; features 12-foot lanes and eight-foot shoulders, 10 bridges designed to withstand a 9.0 earthquake, and scenic views of the Coast Range that in places extend out 10 to 15 miles; and is designed for a 55-mile-per-hour speed limit, with numerous passing lanes. The realignment only cuts overall travel time by 10 to 15 minutes.

Far more vital are the safety and commerce benefits.

"This project is putting a lot of money into the local economy," Knapp said. And it's true.

At this time, the project keeps 300 to 310 workers busy "day and night" with two, 10-hour shifts six days per week. That's up from 2008, when 253 workers from Yaquina River Constructors and ODOT - 90 percent of them from Lincoln and Benton counties - put in 105,348 hours between June 1 and Sept. 13, with a "peak week" of 11,262 hours during one stretch in August. The upward trend in employment will continue when federal stimulus money flows into the effort to provide funding for the project's east and west "bookends."

Once it opens to traffic, the new alignment will facilitate freight movement to the Toledo mill, and the highway itself is likely to become a preferred route to the central Oregon coast.

It should also enhance efforts to diversify the coastal economy. With broadband communications and the Internet highway, folks can live and work almost anywhere, and many retirees are choosing scenic places like the Oregon coast to live, not just to visit. Making the physical highways easier to traverse would enhance the chances of them opting for a permanent coastal home.

Cutting through the rugged terrain of the Coast Range has proven extremely challenging. Geological anomalies - specifically, massive ancient landslides - have only added to the logistics of dealing with the normally steep, unstable slopes; a wet season that brings an average of 78 inches of rain per year, with attendant erosion and runoff worries; 27 waterways - five of them with endangered species; and a very tight 120-day construction window (June 1 to Sept. 15). Crossing the waterways requires 10 bridges totaling 4,140 feet with 29 spans.

"My reward is when it's done," Knapp said, calling the current status of the project a "hidden success " since most folks lack access to the sites where the "real work" is occurring. "And see, the bridge goes somewhere," he added, with a wry smile. Indeed it does.

Knapp also pointed to the collaborative effort that kept the project going. The overall collaborative effort began years ago, and has involved many public and private individuals and groups. Barring anymore unforeseen problems, they should all be traveling on the bridges to somewhere by 2011. (td)

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