

HIGHWAY 20 PROJECT

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Workers from the U.S. Hwy 20 realignment project near Eddyville get a "ringside" seat to watch one of the many blasts used to loosen stubborn rock and make the rugged terrain of the Coastal Range more malleable and moveable. The \$185-million project is scheduled for completion by December 2011. (Photo by Terry Dillman)

"Fire in the hole!" "Fire in the hole!" "Here we go!" Seconds later, 40,000 cubic yards of rock and dirt burst from the ground and rocketed skyward, propelled by a construction blast at what's known as Cut 4 in the U.S. 20 Pioneer Mountain to Eddyville highway project. The "as seen on TV" warning before the blast is required procedure, said Eric Knapp, assistant project manager from the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT).

Knapp and Project Manager Joe Squire offered the News-Times a front-row view of the blast, followed by an end-to-end tour of the now hustling and bustling project. Much is happening that travelers on Highway 20 can't see from their limited viewpoints. The few visible places along the "old" winding stretch between Eddyville and Pioneer Mountain are a mere fraction of the overall effort, and the relative calm at those sites belies the frenzied activity taking place behind the scenic mountains of the Coast Range.

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, noting that more than 300

workers are plying their skills "day and night." Project managers are running two 10-hour shifts, six days per week to keep the project moving toward its much-anticipated completion in 2011.

"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 .

The July 16 boomer is one of numerous blasts project engineers are using to turn stubborn rock into manageable rubble that massive earthmoving equipment can handle. The project calls for moving a total 4-million cubic yards of rock (they are more than halfway now at 2.2-million cubic yards), and only about a third of it is moveable by conventional excavation methods. The rest they have to blast. Landslides and bridges

Project managers have also encountered other challenges, expected and the unexpected - most notably, ancient landslides as deep as 120 to 150 feet. Discovery of those landslides brought the work to a standstill for a few months in 2007, and threatened to shut the project down altogether.

A prime example is the "longest and highest" bridge over Crystal Creek at the site of one major old landslide. When complete, Knapp said the 1,100-foot bridge would have seven spans, and stand 230 feet tall at the highest point - and it spans "the smallest tributary" of the project, simply because "it's so steep."

After negotiation, all components of the original \$129.9-million contract remained in place, except for agreed-upon changes for landslide mitigation . The change order of \$54.8 million included a permanent agreement not to pursue or assert allegations or claims against each other pertaining to pre-work suspension issues.

In other words, forge ahead, which they have done.

"We're halfway there," said Knapp. "This is viewed as a success, and a great collaboration . We're learning all the time. We continue to become more efficient." Progress reports

Squire and Knapp are doing what they can to keep the public informed about the project's progress.

Among other things, Squire and Joe LeRoy Best, senior estimator for project contractor Yaquina River Constructors made a presentation to Toledo City Council in February. They talked about the major problems that shut down the project prior to their joining it, and how things have progressed since work began anew in May 2008. Squire also took a small group of local and state officials on a March 3 tour of the site, including Oregon Transportation Commission member Alan Brown, and Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association Director Onno Husing.

And they welcomed press attention at the July 16 blast, with updates available on request .

The project's east and west "bookends" should soon benefit from pending federal stimulus funds, which will also bring more jobs, Knapp noted.

If all continues to go well, folks could see a ribbon cutting ceremony and traffic on the new highway sometime ahead of the contract completion deadline of December 2011. Terry Dillman is the assistant editor of the News-Times . Contact him at 265-8571 , ext 225, or terrydillman@newportnewstimes .com.

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Project Challenges

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- 6-mile new alignment through the Coast Range
- Steep, unstable slopes, with steep grades
- Average annual rainfall about 80 inches; winter storm water control
- 27 waterways cross the project site, 5 with endangered species
- Cut slopes more than 200 feet vertical
- Embankments more than 180 feet vertical
- 120-day construction window (June 1 to Sept. 15)
- Limited in-water work period (July 1 to Sept. 15) for fish protection

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