



Shovels ready to resume straightening U.S. 20

Corvallis-Newport - Downtime lets the state and its contractor find a cheaper way to stabilize old slides

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LORI TOBIAS
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NEWPORT -- A stalled construction project to straighten U.S. 20 between Newport and Corvallis is moving again.

After nearly a year of negotiations, the Oregon Department of Transportation and Granite Construction Co. reached an agreement late last week to proceed on the project, ODOT announced Monday.

The project would shorten a 10-mile stretch of dangerous curves to seven miles of straight highway and could now be completed as early as 2011. Construction is not expected to significantly affect traffic as most of the work will be on rural land not currently traveled.

The revised project will use technology with buttresses to stabilize the ancient landslides along the highway that led to work being halted last July. The buttresses act much like a doorstop, said Joe Squire, ODOT project manager.

"In your office, you might have a 200-pound door that is held immobile by a half-pound rubber doorstop," he said. "The trick is to use the doorstop as a device that simply transfers the potential energy from the door into an immovable object -- with a doorstop, that object is the floor. In the project area, ODOT and the contractor will use hillsides and bedrock."

Engineers estimate more than 4 million cubic yards of earth will be moved to straighten and shorten the route, said Joseph Harwood, ODOT spokesman. The project will include eight new bridges.

The project was originally slated at \$150 million -- the single largest highway project ODOT has undertaken since building Interstate 205 in the 1970s. The landslide mitigation work is expected to cost an additional \$55 million.

The state will pay about \$47 million, and Granite, a Watsonville, Calif., company operating here as Yaquina River Constructors, is kicking in \$8 million to \$12 million.

"One of the things we are pretty happy with right now is that when the contract went into suspension, the landslide mitigation was figured at \$61 million," Harwood said. "The time off was worth it. We've come up with a proven method to stabilize these landslides and are able to do it for significantly less than the initial estimate."

Problems with the project arose in summer 2006 when heavy rains washed debris into creeks and rivers from 160 acres of cleared mountain forestland.

In 2007, the state Department of Environmental Quality fined Granite \$240,000, one of the largest penalties in a decade, and ODOT \$90,000 for damaging salmon spawning grounds in the Yaquina River and its tributaries. A criminal investigation is continuing.

Word that the project is back on track is welcome in the coastal community of Newport, where residents have attempted for decades to get the state to fix the narrow, winding road.

"It's been real frustrating to watch the equipment leave and see the grass growing," said Lincoln County Commissioner Terry Thompson. "We've lost a lot of lives over the years, it's affected a lot of families, and it's curtailed the economy."

"I'm excited. It is going to make Newport an even more solid community."

Lori Tobias: 541-265-9394; loritobias@aol.com