

# IMPROVE 81

Summer 2022

## 81 INSIDER

### Hearing From You

The Virginia Department of Transportation has been offering details – and gathering stakeholder input – on several major projects in the Interstate 81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP). Open house public hearings during the spring and summer months of 2022 focus on upcoming projects in Roanoke, Botetourt and Augusta counties and the city of Harrisonburg.

The VDOT Staunton District hosted a May 24 public meeting on plans to add a third lane to I-81 northbound and southbound in Augusta County near the city of Staunton. The \$172 million project runs between exit 221 (I-64 junction) and exit 225 (Woodrow Wilson Parkway) and includes widening of five bridges. Meeting participants viewed large display boards with details of the project, and had a chance to talk with designers, environmental specialists and traffic operations staff.

The Staunton-area widening will be a design-build project, with a contractor/engineer team finishing the design and proceeding with



*Staunton widening public hearing*

construction. VDOT plans to issue a request for proposals in late 2022, and award a design-build contract in spring 2023. Construction should begin later that year.

On June 28, the \$320 million widening of I-81 in Harrisonburg attracted motorists, neighbors, business owners and other stakeholders to a public meeting at Pleasant Valley Elementary School. Visitors viewed the plans on large display boards, and saw video simulations of I-81 before and after construction.



## Hearing From You (continued)

Like the Staunton-area project, the Harrisonburg widening would take place toward the median in order to minimize the interstate's footprint. It calls for three lanes in each direction between mile marker 242 (about a mile south of exit 243) and 248.4 (about a mile north of exit 247). The plans also include replacing eight I-81 bridges and the Pleasant Valley Road overpass, and installation of sound-barrier walls along parts of the project. Construction is tentatively scheduled to start in 2025.

Coming up on July 27, Blue Ridge Community College will be the venue for a public meeting on the Weyers Cave truck climbing lanes project. This \$127 million improvement is near the Augusta-Rockingham county line, with northbound and southbound climbing lanes between mile markers 234 and 238. The project will help reduce congestion and improve safety on steep grades, where

commercial vehicles can struggle to maintain interstate speed. Additional improvements with this project include acceleration and deceleration lane extensions at nearby exit 235.

Late summer is the tentative schedule for a public hearing on the widening of northbound and southbound I-81 between exits 143 and 150 in Roanoke and Botetourt counties. At more than \$300 million, it is among the most expensive improvements in the I-81 CIP. It requires replacement of seven bridges, extensive grading and coordination with two truck weigh stations.

Additional information about these projects and upcoming public input opportunities are found on [Improve81.org](https://www.improve81.org). The website is continually updated, so check back often.



*Harrisonburg public meeting video simulation*



## The People Behind the Projects

Meet some of the team members who offer expertise, dedication and innovative thinking to the Interstate 81 Corridor Improvement Program.

Location and Design Project Manager Jim Jones is our summer 2022 profile. Jim has been responsible for designing multiple CIP projects in the Bristol District. He has over 21 years of experience with VDOT, beginning his career at VDOT in 2000. Jim will be retiring from VDOT this fall and his knowledge, skills and calm demeanor will be greatly missed but we are thankful for the dedicated service he has provided the Commonwealth and the I-81 CIP.

### What I-81 CIP projects are you currently involved in?

I was responsible for the design of three truck climbing lanes on I-81, with the first of the three projects being advertised for construction this summer. That project will be located northbound near exit 39 in the Seven Mile Ford area of Smyth County. The other two truck climbing lane projects are in Washington County: one on northbound Interstate 81 near mile marker 32 in the Glade Spring area, and one southbound at mile marker 34 near the Smyth County line. The Washington County projects will move forward to construction in summer 2023. Combined, these projects are valued at \$45.4 million.

### What are some of the items taken into consideration when designing your projects?

In addition to the public feedback we received during public involvement in spring 2021, we also work with local officials to ensure we are addressing as many of the issues as we can or addressing the most pressing issues first. We also reviewed current traffic counts and traffic projections about 20 years out to ensure the design takes projected traffic into consideration.

### How do the projects that you work on benefit the I-81 CIP and the drivers on the interstate?

The truck climbing lane projects I've been working on will provide a great benefit for passenger vehicles and truck drivers, giving motorists the ability to maneuver more easily around the trucks at steep grades. All three locations have grades between 3 and 4%. Most of the truck traffic at these locations slows to between 45 and 55 miles per hour as they climb the grade, which is a great speed difference between them and other traffic traveling 70 miles per hour. In addition to the truck climbing lanes, the two northbound truck climbing lanes near exit 32 and exit 39 will include the extension of acceleration lanes and widening to three lanes about 1,000 feet beyond the crest of the hill. This will give trucks the opportunity to regain adequate speed to merge into the travel lanes.

### What do you look forward to most about the changes that are happening on I-81?

As someone who regularly drives I-81, I see the great need for these improvements. The traffic on I-81 – especially the truck traffic – is greater than ever imagined when the interstate was initially constructed. Having the funding needed to deliver these projects and realizing the potential for improved traffic flow along the corridor is rewarding.

## Construction and Completion

Several I-81 CIP projects recently wrapped up, while many more are currently under construction. The photos on these pages show just a portion of those active projects. They include acceleration- or deceleration-lane extensions at four interchanges in the Bristol and Staunton Districts. In the Salem District there is a rest area improvement and a major widening project just underway.

### Bristol District

**Exit 47, Smyth County:** This is the most costly and complex ramp-extension project in the I-81 CIP. As part of a nearly \$7 million design-build contract, A & J Development and Excavation Inc. is adding 0.8 miles to the northbound I-81 acceleration lane near Route 11 in the town of Marion. The project has required blasting and extensive excavation, which allows reconstruction of a steep, curving on-ramp to improve safety and traffic flow. Design and construction work began in 2021, and the project is scheduled to be complete in the fall of 2022. Northbound I-81 in this area has a 24/7 right shoulder closure.

*Exit 47  
in Smyth  
County*



*Exit 47 in Smyth County*

## Construction and Completion (continued)

**Exit 44, Smyth County:** W-L Construction & Paving was awarded a \$3.9 million contract to extend acceleration and deceleration lanes (on- and off-ramps) at three I-81 interchanges in Smyth County. The first one under construction is the southbound acceleration lane at exit 44 near the town of Marion. The contract also includes the northbound and southbound deceleration lanes at exit 39 (Seven Mile Ford), and the exit 47 southbound acceleration lane near Marion.

**Mile Marker 39-38, Smyth County:** This safety project on southbound I-81 adds a high-friction epoxy overlay to the pavement and installs animal control fencing near the right shoulder. The improvements extend from mile marker 39.2 to 38.1, just past exit 39 at Seven Mile Ford. They will improve traction during wet weather and reduce collisions with deer and other animals. As part of a \$1.1 million contract, W-L Construction & Paving began work in early spring 2022 and is scheduled to finish in late summer 2022.

*Exit 44 in Smyth County*



*Mile Marker 39-38 in Smyth County*



## Construction and Completion (continued)

### Salem District

**Troutville Rest Area, Botetourt County:** Careful planning and coordination allow the rest area near southbound mile marker 158 to be closed for only three months during a project that brings multiple improvements. Contractor Branch Civil Inc. is extending the deceleration lane (off-ramp) by 500 feet and the acceleration lane (on-ramp) by 2,100 feet. The \$4.9 million project also includes an expansion of truck parking by about a dozen spaces. The rest area closed for construction on May 31 and is scheduled to reopen by September 2, just before Labor Day.



*Troutville Rest Area*



*Troutville Rest Area*

**Exit 137-141 Widening, Salem and Roanoke County:** The I-81 CIP's first widening project adds a third lane in both directions between mile markers 136.6 and 141.8. The \$179 million design-build project, under the direction of contractor Archer Western Construction LLC, began in early 2022 with shoulder widening and installation of concrete barriers. This work allows traffic to shift slightly away from the median, where the third northbound and southbound lanes will be constructed. This project also includes

replacement of six bridges and widening of two others. Completion is scheduled for spring 2026. Motorists driving through this portion of I-81 should be alert for northbound and southbound lane closures during evening and overnight hours.



*Exit 137-141 Widening*



*Exit 137-141 Widening*

## Construction and Completion (continued)

### Staunton District

**Exit 205, Rockbridge County:** This busy interchange near Raphine is home to several truck stops, so improvements focus on helping tractor trailers navigate turns and minimize speed differentials between cars and trucks. A single \$4.7 million construction contract includes projects funded by SMART SCALE and the I-81 CIP. Contractor A & J Development and Excavation Inc. is extending northbound and southbound acceleration lanes, widening off-ramps and constructing new turn lanes. Work on the southbound side was finished in spring 2022. The entire project is scheduled for completion in October 2022. Shoulder closures are in place 24/7 along the I-81 northbound ramps.







## Keep in Touch

Have a question or comment regarding the I-81 CIP? Connect with VDOT's Improve81 communications team!

### CONTACT THE VDOT CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTER (24/7/365)

 1-800-367-7623  
 (1-800-FOR ROAD)

 [vdotinfo@vdot.virginia.gov](mailto:vdotinfo@vdot.virginia.gov)

 VDOT Customer Service app:  
<https://my.vdot.virginia.gov/>

An agent will answer your questions and/or forward your questions and comments with contact information you provide to the appropriate I-81 CIP team member.

### CONNECT WITH US

For access to I-81 VDOT district Twitter feeds, regional 511 traffic feeds, overall district news and district traffic alerts, go to [improve81.org](http://improve81.org), look at the website menu bar then select "Contact Us" and scroll to the bottom of the page.

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### Program Website

[www.improve81.org](http://www.improve81.org)