

IMPROVE 81

Summer 2023

81 INSIDER

Three Lanes Coming to the Staunton Area

Interstate 81’s first widening project north of Roanoke is under way.

In spring 2023 the Commonwealth Transportation Board awarded a \$101 million design-build contract to add a third lane northbound and southbound in Augusta County near Staunton. The project, funded by the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program, extends from exit 221 (the junction with I-64) to exit 225 (Route 262). It includes widening and deck replacement for five bridges.

“These improvements will help make the interstate safer and more reliable through this busy area,” said Jamie Robertson, Area Construction Engineer for the VDOT Staunton District. “It’s the first of several major projects

on the northern half of the corridor, and we’re excited to get started.”

The design-build contractor, Kokosing Construction Company Inc. of Westerville, Ohio, is already working to complete design of the Staunton-area widening project. Kokosing is also responsible for obtaining necessary environmental permits, relocating utilities and acquiring any needed right of way and easements.

“This contractor has already helped deliver some major transportation improvements across the Commonwealth,” said I-81 Program Delivery Director Dave Covington. “The design-build approach allows VDOT to partner with them earlier in the process.

continued on page 2



Geotechnical drilling takes place in the I-81 median near Staunton

Three Lanes Coming to the Staunton Area (continued)

That provides opportunities for innovation and gets us to construction sooner.”

Daytime shoulder closures and overnight lane closures began in June 2023 due to geotechnical drilling, which is part of the project engineering. Beginning in fall 2023, motorists should expect to see tree and brush removal and shoulder work.

“One of the first steps is to strengthen the pavement along the outside shoulders,” explained Construction Manager Joe Duquette. “Once this work is finished, traffic will be shifted to the right so contractors can start widening.” The additional travel lanes will primarily be built to the inside, along the median, allowing VDOT to utilize existing right of way wherever possible.

During most phases of the project, crews will maintain two I-81 travel lanes in each direction. Lane closures will be required during some portions of the work including concrete barrier installation and bridge construction. These traffic restrictions will take place during nighttime and overnight hours.

Construction of the I-81 widening in the Staunton area is expected to take about four years to complete. During part of that time, a separate construction project will bring an auxiliary lane to I-81 southbound between exit 221 and exit 220. The two contractors will coordinate closely to avoid schedule conflicts and minimize traffic disruption.



Nighttime work along I-81 in the Staunton area includes drilling for soil and rock samples



The People Behind the Projects: Dennis Harris, P.E., PMP, Assistant District Administrator for Preliminary Engineering

Meet some of the VDOT team members who offer expertise, dedication, and innovative thinking to the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP). Our Summer 2023 profile is Dennis Harris, Assistant District Administrator for Preliminary Engineering for the Bristol District. Dennis has over 34 years of experience with VDOT, beginning his career as a Drainage Design Technician in 1989. Prior to his current role, Dennis was a District Location & Design Engineer.

How have you been involved with the I-81 CIP?

Since the inception of the I-81 CIP, I have been involved with the development of 28 projects along the corridor that runs through the Bristol District, which is the City of Bristol, Washington, Smyth, and Wythe counties. These projects include extending acceleration or deceleration lanes, adding much needed truck-climbing lanes, adding additional lanes from mile marker 10 to 8.1 southbound and extending the northbound lane approximately one mile.

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

The thing that is on my mind constantly is improving safety for those using the corridor. Extending the length of acceleration and deceleration lanes will help motorists enter and exit the interstate more safely and the truck-climbing lanes will help reduce traffic backups that sometimes lead to crashes.

What has been the biggest challenge of the I-81 CIP?

Identifying ways to deal with the increasing number of large trucks while staying within a limited budget. Projects like truck-climbing lanes do help provide some relief; however, considering our changing culture to a click/order/deliver model, the amount of large truck traffic will continue to grow.

Describe how working on the I-81 CIP differs from other projects.

Things move much quicker due to a dedicated funding stream and a great management team that works well together. Our team has been able to put many projects on the ground using expedited construction plans, so we see results very quickly.

What are some of the considerations when working on CIP projects in your district?

Safety is always the first consideration. We are always looking for new and innovative ways to help make the trip up and down the corridor safer and more enjoyable for the traveling public. Although projects that increase the length of a ramp seem to be small in the overall picture, it is amazing how much one of these projects can help improve safety and overall driver confidence.

continued on page 4

The People Behind the Projects: Dennis Harris (continued)

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

The best thing about every project that we put together for the corridor is the additional safety that it will provide the traveling public. One of the most amazing things about this job is the fact that the improvements you make to a roadway could possibly save lives. Early in my career, I helped with a project on a curvy roadway in one of our rural counties. It included new guardrail along some steep terrain. About six weeks after the project was built, a car full of teenagers had been speeding down the hill, lost control of their vehicle and hit the guardrail. Their car was badly damaged, but no one was hurt because the guardrail had done its job. If we had not done the project, some of those teenagers may not have made it home to their families. The things you do while working for VDOT, either directly or indirectly, can have a lasting effect on the people using our roads.

What have you enjoyed the most about working on the I-81 CIP?

Working with the management team has been a true pleasure. Dave Covington, the I-81 Program Delivery Director, has provided excellent guidance and has been a true partner to the district. He helps us move forward with projects in a manner that best works for our area. Gene Holley, the Bristol District I-81 CIP Coordinator, has done an amazing job putting together and delivering the projects on time and many times under budget. These gentlemen have displayed a true interest in improving the I-81 corridor and in making it safer for the traveling public. It has been a pleasure working with these professionals and seeing the results of their actions put into reality.

We understand you plan to retire at the end of this year. What do you look forward to most about retirement?

I have a new granddaughter who needs to be spoiled so I think that may become my new full-time job. Also, anyone who knows me well knows that I am not a morning person, so I look forward to placing that alarm clock in the garbage truck and waving goodbye as it goes down the street. I will greatly miss the people of VDOT, who have become like family to me. It has been an amazing ride for the past 34 years and I would definitely recommend it to anyone!



Overlooking I-81 in the Bristol district

Making Progress - Updates from the Field

Bristol District

Construction is steadily progressing on the northbound I-81 truck-climbing lane in Smyth County, just north of exit 39 in the Seven Mile Ford area.

The contractor, W-L Construction & Paving, has established erosion and sediment controls along the 1.3-mile project. Crews have completed a large stormwater basin, and are currently working on earth moving and installation of the stormwater drainage system. Roadway construction is expected to begin this fall. Final completion of the truck-climbing lane is scheduled for spring 2024.

Concrete barriers separate the work zone from the northbound right lane, but motorists should be alert for heavy equipment moving in and out of the construction area.

W-L Construction & Paving has finished the last of four interchange improvements in Smyth County, combined under a \$3.9 million contract. The final project, completed in late April, is a southbound acceleration lane extension at exit 47 near the town of Marion. The other three were northbound and southbound deceleration lanes at exit 39, and a southbound acceleration lane at exit 44.

continued on page 6



Stormwater drainage work for truck-climbing lane



Truck-climbing lane work zone just north of exit 39

Making Progress - Updates from the Field (continued)

Salem District

The largest I-81 CIP project currently under construction is a nearly five-mile widening in the City of Salem and Roanoke County. Archer Western Construction LLC is adding a third lane northbound and southbound between exit 137 and exit 141. The contractor reports that the project, which includes replacement of six bridges, is nearly 40% complete.

“By adjusting their work schedules, the contractor has reached many milestone targets,” said Project Manager Chad McMurray. Milestones include placement of concrete beams for new bridges over Route 112 (Wildwood Road) at exit 137. Those bridges are scheduled for completion in fall 2023.

Summer 2023 is expected to bring a traffic pattern change for northbound drivers near exit 140. Contractors plan to move the temporary barrier and shift traffic toward the median side of the interstate. Overnight lane closures will be in place during the transition period.

Final completion of the \$179 million project is scheduled for early 2026.

continued on page 7



A large crane places beams for a new bridge over Wildwood Road



Aerial photo of I-81 widening project at exit 137

Making Progress - Updates from the Field (continued)

Staunton District

Design work for widening I-81 in the Harrisonburg area includes rotary sonic drilling to collect soil and rock samples. This work allows engineers to investigate the complex karst (limestone) geology that is common in the Shenandoah Valley. The resulting information helps them design the foundations for new bridges. The I-81 Harrisonburg widening requires the replacement of nine bridges. The project is scheduled to be advertised for construction bids in 2025.



Rotary sonic drilling along I-81

On the Horizon

Several major projects in the I-81 CIP are reaching key milestones during summer and fall 2023. The details are below, with projects listed chronologically.

JUNE 2023

Two truck-climbing lane projects in Washington County (VDOT Bristol District) were advertised for construction bids. One is located on northbound I-81 just north of exit 32 (Chilhowie), and the other is on southbound I-81 just south of the Smyth-Washington county line. Both truck-climbing lanes will be about a mile long, and will improve traffic flow and safety on steep grades where commercial vehicles may struggle to maintain interstate speeds.

continued on page 8



The rolling terrain of southwest Virginia will be the site of two additional truck-climbing lanes

On the Horizon (continued)

JULY 2023

A southbound I-81 auxiliary lane in Augusta County (VDOT Staunton District) was advertised for construction bids. The project connects two adjacent interchanges: exit 221 (the junction with I-64) and exit 220 (Staunton). Construction of the auxiliary lane will require replacement of the Route 635 (Barterbrook Road) overpass bridge.



A southbound auxiliary lane will connect two interchanges in the Staunton area

AUGUST 2023

VDOT is scheduled to advertise a Bristol-area widening project for construction bids. The project would add a southbound third lane between exit 10 and exit 7, and a third lane northbound for about a mile beginning at the exit 7 entrance ramp. The southbound I-81 bridge over Old Dominion Road will be widened to accommodate the additional lane.

continued on page 9



Widening in the Bristol area is expected to improve safety and traffic flow

On the Horizon (continued)

SEPTEMBER 2023

One of the largest construction projects in the I-81 CIP is scheduled to be the focus of a public hearing. VDOT will share the plans and seek comments on the planned widening between exit 143 (junction with I-581) in Roanoke County and exit 150 (Troutville/Fincastle) in Botetourt County. The project includes a third lane northbound and southbound and replacement of seven bridges. The VDOT Salem District will share the public meeting schedule, location and other details when they are finalized.

Also in September, several projects in the Wytheville area (VDOT Bristol District) are scheduled to be advertised for construction. They include a southbound auxiliary lane between I-81 exit 73 (Route 11) and exit 72 (junction with I-77 northbound), as well as interchange improvements on I-77 exit 41. These two projects are expected to be constructed under a single contract.



A major project just north of Roanoke will include seven miles of widening and seven new bridges








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)

-  VDOT Customer Service app: <https://my.vdot.virginia.gov/>
-  vdotinfo@vdot.virginia.gov
-  1-800-367-7623
(1-800-FOR ROAD)

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](https://www.improve81.org), look at the website menu bar then select "Contact Us" and scroll to the bottom of the page.

Contacts

Communications Contacts

I-81 CIP Communications Specialist

Kenneth Slack | 540-414-5670
ken.slack@vdot.virginia.gov

Salem District

Jason Bond | 540-387-5493
jason.bond@vdot.virginia.gov

Bristol District

Michelle Earl | 276-696-3283
michelle.earl@vdot.virginia.gov

Staunton District

Sandy Myers | 540-332-9201
sandy.myers@vdot.virginia.gov

Program Team

Program Delivery Director

Dave Covington | 540-487-6943
dave.covington@vdot.virginia.gov

Program Website

www.improve81.org