

IMPROVE 81

Winter 2025

81 INSIDER

Ready for Construction

Two major projects in the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP) are about to go under construction in the Shenandoah Valley.

In October the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) awarded a \$58.6 million contract to Shirley Contracting Company LLC to widen about four miles of I-81 southbound near Strasburg. The project extends from mile marker 299.6 in Warren County to 295.4 in Shenandoah County. It will unlock I-81 by enhancing safety and reliability, reducing congestion and supporting economic growth.

“It’s exciting to get improvements started along one of the busiest parts of the corridor,” says Dave Covington, VDOT’s I-81 Program

Delivery Director. “It’s just south of the junction with I-66, and builds off recent improvements at that interchange.” In fall 2024 contractors completed a SMART SCALE-funded project that extended the merge lane from I-66 westbound to I-81 southbound.

Construction starts in early 2025 and is expected to take about three and a half years. Early stages of work will include right-shoulder strengthening and installation of concrete barriers to protect the work zone. I-81 motorists should be alert for 24/7 shoulder closures and single-lane closures as needed, primarily during nighttime and overnight hours.

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Ready for Construction (continued)

The Strasburg-area widening project will avoid impacts on nearby historic battlefields and conservation areas by adding a third southbound lane on the median side.

The project also replaces the southbound bridge over Cedar Creek and widens the southbound bridge over the CSX railway. About one mile of sound-barrier wall will be constructed along northbound I-81 between the Route 638 (Junction Road) overpass and the exit 296 (Route 55) interchange.

Early 2025 will also see the beginning of construction on northbound and southbound truck-climbing lanes near Weyers Cave. The CTB in December awarded Branch Civil Inc. a \$61.4 million contract to build the project between mile marker 234.1 in Augusta County and mile marker 237.9 in Rockingham County. Construction will take place primarily to the inside (toward the median) and within VDOT's existing right-of-way.

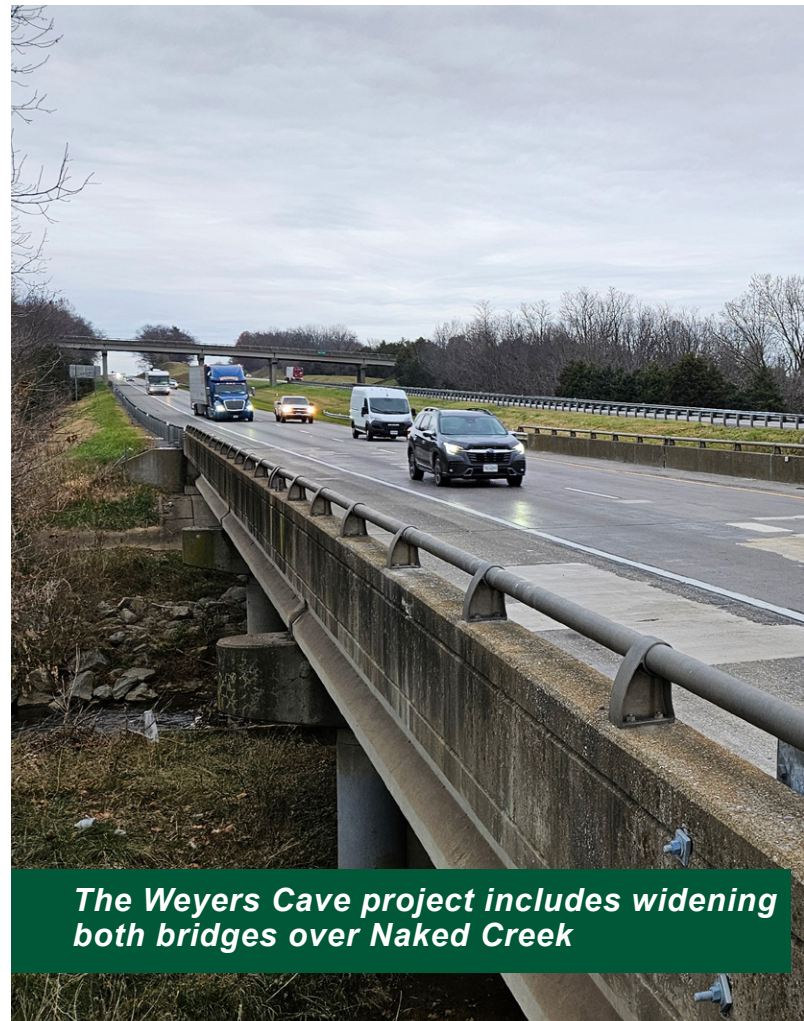
The additional lane in each direction will allow slower-moving commercial vehicles to move to the right, reducing conflicts with motorists in the primary travel lanes. This will help reduce congestion, prevent crashes and improve overall traffic flow. The I-81 CIP includes three other truck-climbing lane projects, all in southwest Virginia. One of them opened to traffic in 2023, and the other two are currently under construction.

“Truck-climbing lanes are not just a solution for steep roads; they’re a lifeline for safer, smoother journeys,” says President and CEO Dale Bennett of the Virginia Trucking Association. “These lanes allow all drivers — whether in trucks or passenger vehicles — to reach their destination with less stress, greater efficiency, and a reduced

risk of collision. Ultimately, truck climbing lanes enhance road safety, save time, and contribute to the efficient movement of freight along the I-81 corridor.”

The Weyers Cave project also widens both bridges over Naked Creek and improves the interchange of I-81 and Route 256 at exit 235. Specifically, contractors will extend the northbound and southbound deceleration lanes (off-ramps) and northbound acceleration lane (on-ramp).

The truck-climbing lanes should be complete in late 2027. The work zone will have shoulder closures for the duration of the project. Single-lane closures will be needed during some phases of construction, mostly at night.



The Weyers Cave project includes widening both bridges over Naked Creek



The People Behind the Projects: Craig Moore, P.E., Project Manger for I-81 CIP

Meet some of the VDOT team members who offer expertise, dedication, and innovative thinking to the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP). Our Winter 2025 profile is Craig Moore, P.E., who serves as Project Manager for Interstate 81 CIP projects within VDOT's Salem District.

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

Serving as the Salem CIP project manager, I oversee the ramp extensions and widening projects on I-81, and facilitate disciplines in roadway, drainage, construction, maintenance and environmental. I work with consultants and VDOT staff who are managing, developing and implementing designs to make sure VDOT policies and standards are followed and interstate conditions are improved. I began working on the CIP in summer 2019.

How will these projects benefit drivers on the interstate?

The overall goal is to reduce congestion, enhance safety and offer greater reliability with improvements such as ramp extensions and widening. Reliability in basic terms is consistently getting where you're going in the amount of time it is generally expected to take. For example, a crash on the interstate can shut down one or both lanes for a considerable amount of time. It could be the middle of the day and suddenly a trip you thought was going to take an hour ends up taking three. By adding a third lane, it allows more options to keep traffic moving in the event of a crash which increases reliability.

Because of our mountainous terrain, we have a lot of ups and downs on the interstate. You may have a fully loaded truck struggling to get up an incline and another truck traveling slightly faster that will get in the left lane to pass. This causes smaller vehicles traveling at 70 mph to get caught behind both. When we add a third lane, it will open a greater opportunity for cars to get around a tractor-trailer passing another tractor-trailer. This will be very helpful for congestion, safety and reliability.

People may wonder how a ramp extension might help. Lengthening these ramps gives people greater opportunity to get up to speed or to slow down when entering or exiting the interstate. An example is the Troutville rest area where we lengthened the deceleration lane coming into the rest area and lengthened the acceleration lane leaving the rest area. The extra space in the deceleration lane allows cars or tractor-trailers to get out of traffic and then slow down, versus slowing down within the mainline which can create congestion and lead to crashes. The extra space in the acceleration lane helps reduce congestion and enhance safety by avoiding having a slow-moving vehicle merge with traffic going 70 mph.

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People Behind the Projects (continued)

Describe how working on the I-81 CIP has been different from other projects.

What I find unique about this compared to other projects is the need to keep two lanes open in both directions. This results in a little less flexibility in how we respond to situations that require diversion of traffic. I'm also managing large-scale projects with bigger budgets from a few million dollars to hundreds of millions of dollars. These are much larger budgets than I have dealt with before. The CIP also includes projects that have more bridges involved. The process is still the same; there's just a lot more of them.

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

I live in Natural Bridge and drive to work in Salem from exit 175 down to exit 140. Prior to that, I was living in Christiansburg, so I was driving from exit 118 to exit 140; my commute to work is pretty much always on the interstate. What I'm looking forward to most is the ability to get around trucks when they're on these stretches where they have slowed down. Another thing I'm looking forward to is the widened shoulders that we are working on where possible. Providing that space gives a way to avoid a crash or keep a crash from happening.

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

Given the speed at which we're trying to develop and deliver these projects, I feel the biggest challenge has been keeping all the VDOT divisions, sections, departments and consultants informed and working together. There are so many components to project development that are intertwined and dependent on someone else doing their part. Making sure tasks are completed, keeping everybody focused and maintaining communication between everybody involved can be challenging. Along with that is trying to help everyone establish priorities whether it be for one project or another.

What have you enjoyed the most about working on these projects?

What I have enjoyed most is the enthusiasm and proactive thinking the entire team has shown. It is exciting to see everyone working together!



Improve81 Construction Updates



Bristol District

Exit 1 to Exit 86

Two separate “bundles” of construction projects are improving Interstates 81 and 77 near Wytheville.

Orders Construction Company Inc. was awarded a \$54 million design-build contract to build an auxiliary lane between I-77 southbound and I-81 southbound, and extend the merge lanes between the two interstates. The project includes replacement of three bridges in order to accommodate the additional lanes. Contractors have installed a concrete barrier wall along the median, and started excavation work in December 2024. Design and construction work will continue in 2025, with final completion expected in early 2027.

Nearby construction includes the reconfiguration of I-77 exit 41 (Peppers Ferry Road), and an auxiliary lane between southbound I-81 exit 73 (Route 11) and exit 72 (I-77 interchange). Branch Civil Inc. is delivering these improvements as part of a \$53.6 million contract that bundles multiple projects.

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Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Branch has completed installing a nearly 400-foot box culvert under I-77 exit 41, where crews are also moving 320,000 cubic yards of fill material to support a new exit ramp. For the auxiliary lane project, the contractor has installed a barrier wall along the median. This allows construction of a bridge-pier protection system to begin this winter. Final completion of both projects is expected in late 2027.

New northbound and southbound truck-climbing lanes are expected to open to traffic in November 2025. They are located near the Smyth-Washington county line, where steep grades challenge commercial vehicles in both directions. W-L Construction & Paving Inc. has a \$17.2 million contract to build the two projects. Crews began initial paving on both truck-climbing lanes in fall 2024. That work is expected to resume in the spring, along with guardrail installation and shoulder construction.

Southbound I-81 widening in the Bristol area has progressed beyond the halfway point. W-L Construction is adding a third lane between exit 10 (Route 11/19) and exit 7 (Old Airport Road/Bonham Road), and extending the three-lane portion of northbound I-81 by about one mile starting at exit 7.

A major part of the \$30.7 million project is replacing the southbound I-81 bridge over Old Dominion Road. W-L is currently working on the new bridge's substructure, which includes concrete piers and abutments. Road work along I-81 in early 2025 includes earth moving, median-barrier installation, and building the base structure for the future travel lanes. Final completion of the project is scheduled for November 2025.

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Base layers of asphalt have been placed for new truck-climbing lanes



Contractors are building a new southbound I-81 bridge over Old Dominion Road

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

A Salem District

Exit 89 to Exit 168

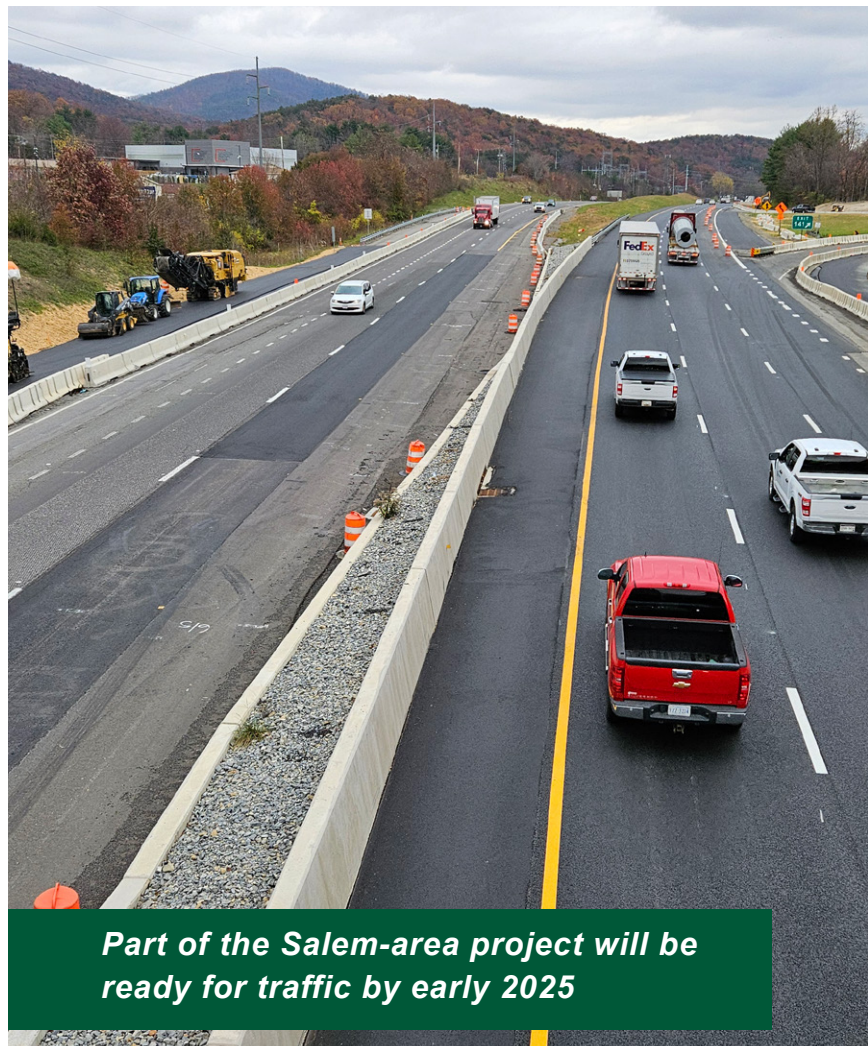
Bridge work has been a key focus for crews widening I-81 in both directions between exit 137 (Route 112) and exit 141 (Route 419) in Roanoke County and Salem. Design-build contractor Archer Western LLC is replacing eight bridges and widening two more as part of the \$179 million project. Other work taking place since fall 2024 includes noise-barrier construction along northbound I-81, excavation of roadside slopes, and installation of lighting and traffic-monitoring equipment.

By early 2025, motorists will be able to start using new northbound and southbound travel lanes between mile marker 140.5 and the northern end of the project. Around the same time, the reconfigured exit 137 interchange between southbound I-81 and Route 112 will open to traffic. Final completion of the project is set for early 2026.

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Second phase of bridge construction over Route 112



Part of the Salem-area project will be ready for traffic by early 2025

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Staunton District

Exit 175 to Exit 323

Over the past several months, I-81 widening near Staunton has focused on extensive earth-moving, initial paving operations, and work on five different bridges. Kokosing Construction Company Inc. has a \$101 million design-build contract to add a third lane northbound and southbound between exit 221 (I-64 junction) and exit 225 (Route 262 north).

Contractors have begun widening the bridges over Lewis Creek, Route 250, Augusta Woods Drive and the ramp to I-64. This work will continue during early 2025 with demolition to portions of the existing bridges, pile driving and pouring concrete for new foundations and abutments.

Initial layers of asphalt have been placed on the southern end of the project, and similar work will take place on the northern

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Median excavation to allow for additional lanes near Staunton

Both I-81 bridges over Lewis Creek are being replaced



Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

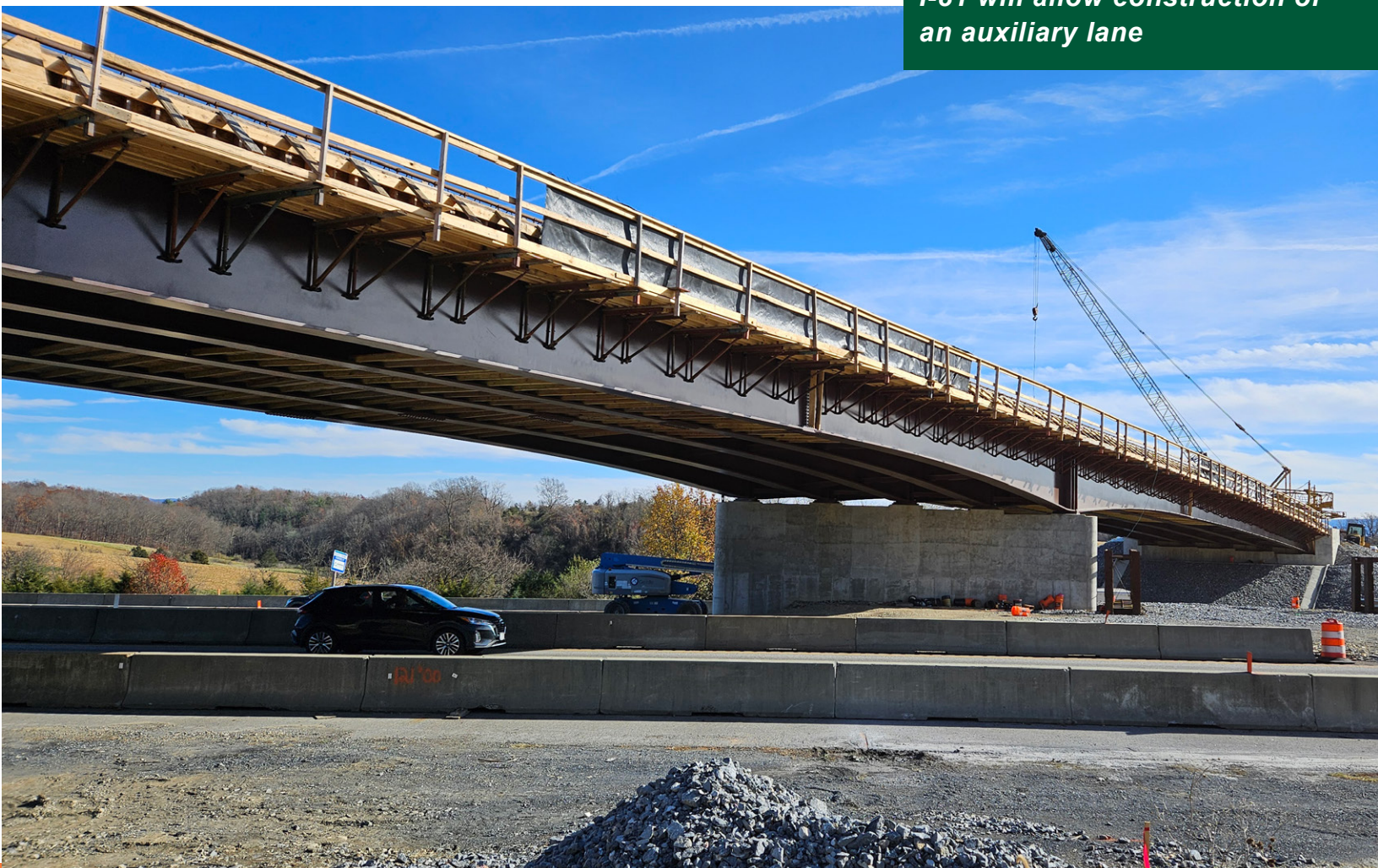
end through spring 2025. The contractor has also been installing new culverts and other drainage structures. This work should be finished this spring. Final completion of the I-81 Staunton-area widening is expected in summer 2027.

Adjacent to the widening project is auxiliary lane construction along I-81 southbound, connecting the exit 221 on-ramp to the exit 220 (Route 262 south) off-ramp. The \$7.7 million project includes replacement of the Route 635 (Barterbrook Road) overpass bridge.

In early 2025, contractor Fairfield-Echols LLC begins the final stages of bridge construction, which includes pouring the concrete deck and installing safety rails. Final completion of the project is scheduled for fall 2025.



The new Route 635 bridge over I-81 will allow construction of an auxiliary lane





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

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.

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For access to I-81 VDOT district X feeds, regional 511 traffic feeds, overall district news and district traffic alerts, visit [Improve81.org](https://www.improve81.org) and click on "Contact Us".

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