

When, oh when, will 31 be done?

MDOT says linking the freeway to I-94 east of Benton Harbor is years away

By SCOTT AIKEN
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Ten years and counting.
A decade has passed since completion of the leg of the U.S. 31 freeway from Berrien Springs to Napier Avenue in Benton Township.

The 9.5-mile stretch of pavement was opened with great fanfare in August 2003, attended by elected leaders who vowed that it wouldn't take much longer to build the next and final segment, a connection to I-94.

The end point for traffic at Napier was supposed to be a temporary connector to I-94 while the freeway project continued.

But building the last section, a 2- to 3-mile extension that would tie U.S. 31 and I-94 together at an interchange east of Benton Harbor, has proven to be elusive.

Although the Michigan Department of Transportation has purchased about 95 percent of the right-of-way and has updated environmental studies and done design work, the funding well for the project is nearly dry.

"It's discussed, but there aren't a lot of projects on the improved-capacity list," said Jason Latham, regional planning manager for MDOT. "This is the only one in our nine counties."

Starting about the time U.S. 31 was completed to Napier, MDOT changed its focus on road projects, shifting away from those that expand traffic capacity to system preservation.

It was an acknowledgement of funding limitations that have only gotten worse. MDOT estimates that without more money, either through a gasoline tax increase or some other source, the state road system will continue to deteriorate.

Since 2010, the percentage of Michigan roads rated good or fair has slipped from 90 percent to 80 percent, MDOT said. If funding levels do not increase, the number will slip to an estimated 70 percent by 2015.

Although finishing U.S. 31 in Berrien County looks straightforward on a map, the connection to I-94 and related improvements make for a complicated and expensive project.

Latham said the price tag, an estimated \$92 million, breaks down in three roughly equal parts: \$30 million each for I-94 widening and a new Territorial Road bridge, for building the interchange of U.S. 31 and I-94, and for new U.S. 31 construction.

Plans call for U.S. 31 and I-94 to join at Business Loop 94, or BL-94, now a partial interchange.

A far-off priority

Although the project is not in MDOT's five-year forecast, it remains a long-term priority, according to Director Kirk Steudle.

In a February letter to state Rep. Al

See U.S. 31, page A4



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

The U.S. 31 freeway in Berrien County was completed to its end point at Napier Avenue in Benton Township in 2003. The Michigan Department of Transportation has long-range plans to finish the freeway by connecting it to I-94 and BL-94 east of Benton Harbor but the \$92 million needed for the project is not available.



A sign marks the end of the U.S. 31 freeway at Napier Avenue in Benton Township. For the past decade, northbound freeway traffic has exited onto Napier, which serves as a connector to I-94.

U.S. 31

► From page A1

Pscholka, R-Stevensville, Steudle said the MDOT strategy remains focused on road system preservation.

"This strategy has left little funding for new freeway construction," Steudle wrote. "At current state and federal transportation funding levels, this strategy is not likely to change soon."

When money becomes available, he said, the remaining portion of the project would be divided into three phases, the first a reconfiguring of the I-94/BL-94 interchange.

That work would be followed by more improvements to the I-94 corridor in the interchange area, and then by the U.S. 31 extension.

Steudle said about nine properties remain to be acquired on the right-of-way at a cost of about \$1.3 million.

Also, a major pipeline must be relocated, work that would take as long as two years.

Pscholka said the letter was a response to his annual request for a status report on the freeway project.

Pscholka said that as long as he's in office he will continue to push for action to complete the freeway project, which in Berrien County started at the state line in 1977.

"I'm not giving up on it," he said.

Although not much has happened to move things forward for years, Pscholka said, people still talk about getting the project completed.

"It came up today," he said in a phone interview Monday. "At Radom Farm Supply I was talking with growers who asked, 'What's happening with U.S. 31?'"

A long history

The U.S. 31 project has



Don Campbell / HP staff

In this photo taken Tuesday from the Snow Road overpass, traffic flows down U.S. 31 near Berrien Springs. Completed in 2003, the highway still lacks a direct connection to I-94 and Michigan lacks the necessary funds to connect the two.

been on the drawing board since the 1960s, when planning began for a freeway to replace Old U.S. 31, a dangerous and obsolete two-lane that ran through Niles and Berrien Springs to the Twin Cities.

The first freeway section in the county, 3.3 miles from the state line to U.S. 12 west of Niles, was completed in 1979 for \$6.6 million. The new road joined Indiana's section of the freeway.

Over the next 20 years work stalled periodically for lack of funding and other reasons, including the discovery of the habitat of an endangered butterfly, Mitchell's satyr, in the right-of-way.

MDOT avoided the habitat issue by shifting the route of the northernmost section of the freeway to the currently planned alignment, connecting at I-94/BL-94. A small section of the U.S. 31 freeway extends north of Napier Avenue, but it is not open to traffic.

The freeway was built from U.S. 12 to Napier Avenue in four phases, re-

quiring construction of three sets of bridges over the St. Joseph River. Total project cost from the state line to Napier was estimated in 2003 at \$160 million.

Until the project is finished, a section of Napier about 1.75 miles long serves as a connector between U.S. 31 and I-94/I-196.

Through traffic using the connector must make turns and navigate traffic lights at each end. Unlike a freeway, Napier is not limited-access. It has a speed limit of 50 or 55 mph.

MDOT widened and improved Napier to accommodate the traffic load, but with the growing volume of vehicles the road can be a bottleneck, officials said.

Officials say construction of the U.S. 31 freeway has had the desired effect of moving a lot of truck traffic off other roads and has spurred some development at interchanges at a measured pace.

Getting it done

Completing the project

would add the missing link needed to provide freeway system continuity in the area, according to an MDOT report.

Connecting east-west I-94 with north-south I-196/U.S. 31, all limited-access roads, is expected to improve traffic flow greatly.

Just south of the state line, U.S. 31 connects to the Indiana Tollway and reaches Indianapolis and beyond.

In addition, completion would relieve traffic congestion on Napier Avenue and help economic development in financially distressed Benton Harbor by providing the city with improved freeway access, according to MDOT's assessment.

In 2001, daily traffic counts on Napier in Benton Township were about 6,000 vehicles.

The number began to increase after completion of the freeway to Napier in 2003.

In 2012, the average daily count on Napier was 12,300 at the U.S. 31 interchange, and 15,100 near

the entrance to Lake Michigan College.

Growth along the corridor, including the planned relocation of the Berrien County Health Department and county Animal Control to the former Schroeder Motors property, is expected to add to the volume.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, which supports completion of the project, said the lack of an interchange between U.S. 31 and I-94 increases the load of freeway-bound traffic on Pipestone Road and Napier, stressing pavement.

Suzann Flowers, associate planner at SMPC, said another concern is the increase in U.S. 31 traffic expected with the completion of major improvement projects on the freeway in Indiana.

One project, construction of a new four-lane, divided and limited-access stretch of U.S. 31 around Kokomo, is scheduled for completion in December.

The \$155 million project will allow traffic to flow around the city instead of using the old route, which includes 15 intersections with traffic lights.

The concern is that more traffic will use U.S. 31, "and we won't be ready," Flowers said.

Using Napier as a temporary freeway link poses other challenges, she said.

The large volume of truck traffic makes it extremely difficult to expand nonmotorized transportation options in the area by building bicycle lanes or sidewalks.

"It's a serious safety issue," Flowers said of the Napier traffic. "We're charged with creating safe communities."

Expanding alternatives to motor vehicles is a goal of transportation planners in an effort to reduce congestion and cut air pollution.

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