

## What 31 might bring

Along the freeway  
in Berrien County,  
officials are hoping for  
— and controlling — the  
growth of businesses

By **SCOTT AIKEN**  
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**BERRIEN SPRINGS** — Mike Hildebrand likes to tell people that the U.S. 31 interchange just north of Berrien Springs is “20 minutes from everywhere.”

The Oronoko Township supervisor, a third-generation farmer, said the freeway has made it that easy to reach his community from the Twin Cities, south Berrien County or Indiana.

“I hope that will catch on,” he said of the phrase, which is intended as an enticement for people to visit the Berrien Springs area or maybe open a business.

In his first year in office, Hildebrand sees the freeway exit as an asset, one that can bring in hundreds of people a day and help the community prosper.

But growth must be done carefully to maintain balance with the area’s farming, agri-tourism and other interests, he said.

He said the township is closely adhering to a 2010 master plan and is working to secure funding for water and sewer line extensions from the village of Berrien Springs that could open the U.S. 31 interchange to motels and other development.

The township is also joining Berrien Springs on an M-139 corridor plan and is considering an interchange beautification project.

Construction is taking place near Exit 15 in the form of a building being erected by the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Lake Union Conference.

In this area, Oronoko Township is along the most recently completed section of U.S. 31, the 9.5-mile leg from M-139 in the Berrien Springs area to Napier Avenue in Benton Township. It was finished in 2003. (U.S. 31 is a long route that goes from southern Alabama to northern Michigan.)

While the Michigan Department of Transportation has long-range plans to complete the freeway to a connection with I-94, funding is not likely to be available for years. (See accompanying story.)

### Growth at interchanges

In the 10 years since the

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section opened from Berrien Springs north, development has occurred slowly near interchanges in the three townships on the route – Oronoko, Sodus and Benton. The townships have taken care to address zoning and related issues in order to keep control over how development occurs.

Two of the U.S. 31 freeway interchanges are in Sodus Township, at Pipestone Road in the north and Tabor Road in the south.

In anticipation of the freeway coming through, the Township Board developed zoning and master plan changes to control development. The aim is to keep the southern and western parts of the township rural while allowing commercial and other development in the north.

So far, the strategy is working, said township Planning Commission Chairman Fred Leitz, a farmer.

One small surprise, he said, is that no development has taken place around the Pipestone interchange, which is zoned for motels, gas stations and other businesses that serve freeway traffic.

Two companies chose to build not far from the Tabor Road interchange. They are Fillmore Equipment, a farm equipment and implement dealer, and Regloplas Co., which makes temperature-control units.

The decisions to allow the companies to build last year were made after well-attended public meetings and consideration by the Sodus Township Planning Commission and Township Board, township Supervisor Michele Bennett said.

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Don Campbell / HP staff

Construction continues on the future home of the Lake Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists near the U.S. 31 freeway interchange at M-139 north of Berrien Springs. Development is occurring slowly at exits on the 9.5-mile section of the freeway from Berrien Springs to Napier Avenue in Benton Township.

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All in all, Sodus officials said, the freeway has not had a lot of impact on the township, although it has made getting around a lot easier. Freeway noise has not proved to be the problem that some people feared.

Bennett said the township chose to make its portion of U.S. 31 a scenic corridor, which limits billboards.

"We want the scenic drive, to have people see the farmland," she said.

Leitz and Bennett both emphasized the importance of finishing the freeway all the way to a connection with I-94.

"They need to get it finished," said Leitz, who described problems encountered by truckers who now must exit at Napier Avenue at the U.S. 31 end point.

### In Benton Township

Benton Township Supervisor Nora Jefferson said the freeway's arrival has had some impact.

"Lake Michigan College is adding a dormitory to enhance the property and

bring in students," she said.

Tom Baldwin, the township's chief building inspector, said years ago the township did a corridor study of the freeway and Napier Avenue.

"Back when the highway opened we realized there might be a significant push for development along Napier," Baldwin said. The idea of the study was to see what businesses should locate along Napier, with an eye to offering some protection to the Fairplain Plaza commercial area.

Restrictions were added to the township master plan to limit development. A section of Napier is limited to office use and educational facilities.

"We haven't seen a lot of activity regarding professional offices along that area," he said.

The Berrien County Health Department's decision to move to the former Schroeder Motors property on Napier near the I-94 interchange could have some impact, Baldwin said.

In addition, infrastructure is somewhat limited, he said, with some areas not served by municipal water and sewer.

Benton Township offi-

cial support efforts to finish the U.S. 31 freeway, action that would take a lot of truck traffic and other vehicle congestion off Napier.

### Third time a charm?

In Oronoko Township, Supervisor Hildebrand sees water and sewer service as vital to developing the U.S. 31 interchange at M-139.

Attempts were made in 2001 and 2010 to expand water and sewer systems to include the freeway interchange area. The first led to the recall of some Township Board members, and the public rejected both proposals as too expensive.

This year, the Township Board, working with the village and other government and private sources, came up with a plan that is expected to get the project moving. The \$4.8 million project would be financed with federal, state, county and local government sources, along with private pledges.

If a federal grant and a rural development loan are approved, the project will go forward – with no local tax increase.

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Hildebrand said water and sewer services at the interchange could attract a motel or other freeway traffic businesses.

The utility system improvements could also help other slated developments

that would bring people and business to the community, among them the planned multimillion-dollar expo arena at the Berrien County Youth Fairgrounds.

Oronoko Township Planning Commission Chairman Jeff Lemon said the freeway is already bringing more traffic into the area.

According to the Michigan Department of Transportation, the daily vehicle count in 2011 on U.S. 31 just south of the M-139 interchange was 15,000. The count was 6,600 vehicles daily on average on M-139 south of the interchange.

The MDOT study shows that 6,000 to 8,000 vehicles per day use the interchange,

which presents business opportunities for the Berrien Springs area.

Lemon, who owns Lemon Creek Winery, said he's noticed the influx at his business.

"I see more and more cars coming from the east," he said. "We get a lot of calls from people coming from Indiana."

Lemon said the interchange area needs a motel or motels and more restaurants to serve those visitors.

"We find people asking where to stay, where to eat," he said, and the freeway has contributed to that.

Visitors have been coming to Berrien County "forever" on I-94 and Red Ar-

row Highway, Lemon said, but the U.S. 31 freeway brings traffic from different directions.

Extending sewer and water service to the interchange area "makes unlimited opportunities for controlled growth there," he said.

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