

THE BIG FIX

A USER'S GUIDE
to Upgrade I-74

SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2004
A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT
TO THE JOURNAL STAR
SECTION H

Pace of project picks up

As I-74 work builds towards monumental 2005, patience will be key for central Illinois motorists

BY MATT BUEDEL
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

They said from the start that the Interstate 74 overhaul would be huge. But when engineers labeled Upgrade 74 the top downstate road project to date — \$460 million price tag included — the title could hardly prepare Peoria-area motorists for what was to come.

And construction has yet to kick into high gear.

"Right now, the construction is kind of spotted," said Eric Therakildsen, program development engineer for the Illinois Department of Transportation. "It's not a continuous line from East Peoria to Sterling (Avenue).

"Come later this fall and mainly next April, it's going to be continuous construction from Washington Street in East Peoria all the way to Sterling," he said. "It's going to be a lot different of a feel."

The first-phase work, which amounts to about \$100 million, 3,500 orange barrels and 500 barricades, continues through November with all work on aging overpasses and auxiliary roads still going according to schedule. Bids on the second stage, expected to reach around \$160 million, are due by mid-summer.

Some preparatory work on phase two starts this fall, but major shifts in traffic patterns associated with the second phase won't emerge until spring 2005, when all of I-74 from Downtown through East Peoria shuts down. Eastbound lanes spanning the entire length of construction also will close, with traffic detoured onto existing westbound lanes, which will be divided by temporary concrete barriers.

IDOT engineers credit contractors and strict contractual deadlines with maintaining the project's original timetable, which predicts a christening for the refurbished interstate in December 2006. Finances also appear to be on target.

Contingencies built into the estimated overall cost will cover skyrocketing fuel and steel prices, Therakildsen said, though inflation may raise the final tally when all is said and done.

"We don't work in tomorrow's dollars; we work in today's," Therakildsen said. "We inflate it

as we move along."

Meanwhile, commuters appear to have adjusted to permanent and temporary closures, as well as lane reductions, detours and delays. Several motorists who wrote to the Journal Star about their experiences driving through work zones commended contractors and IDOT for keeping traffic flowing.

"Of course, some extra time has been required, but Christmas traffic has caused more problems (than I-74 work)," said Peorian Bliss Phillips. "My one main deviation has been to avoid the University Street overpass and exits. The volume of traffic (through) that area cannot be accommodated as normal."

Carole Hill of Peoria also avoids the University bridge, opting to take Sterling to Farmington Road and Main Street when she needs to access Downtown.

"In general, one can get around town (though) a little more slowly and indirectly than in the past," Hill said. "This huge project will have great benefit to our city and its residents when it is completed. We all just need to be patient."

That's the mantra IDOT has espoused and Illinois State Police have enforced. Hundreds of impatient drivers heading through work zones have learned firsthand the meaning of troopers' zero-tolerance policy.

Since last July, state police have handed out nearly 1,700 tickets and more than 2,100 written

warnings, with as many as four troopers patrolling work zones at any given time.

The stepped-up patrols are meant to protect motorists as much as laborers on the roadside. No major injuries among workers have been reported and only one accident involving a contractor's truck has occurred, according to IDOT.

A majority of the 76 commuter accidents in work zones since the beginning of 2004 also did not involve injuries, according to police, who along with other emergency personnel have had their own difficulties navigating constantly changing construction sites.

Maneuvering 50-foot-long ladder trucks through lane reductions has forced Peoria firefighters to sometime manually move barricades as they respond to calls. As a result, response time for firefighters at Peoria's Central House on Monroe Street has increased by 30 seconds to a minute on some rush-hour calls. Paramedics also report a slight increase in their response times.

Trying to keep confusion to a minimum among emergency responders and commuters is a network of IDOT engineers and consultants, headed by Upgrade 74 spokeswoman Beth Mosher.

IDOT has implemented an Intelligent Transportation System that includes 30 message boards and cameras along the interstate. The boards notify drivers of possible delays, while cameras give emergency dispatchers a firsthand view of highway congestion.



A computer rendering of the reconstructed Interstate 74 when complete in 2006. This view, from the bluff above Downtown, looks east toward OSF Saint Francis Medical Center. Bottom overpass is Sheridan Road.

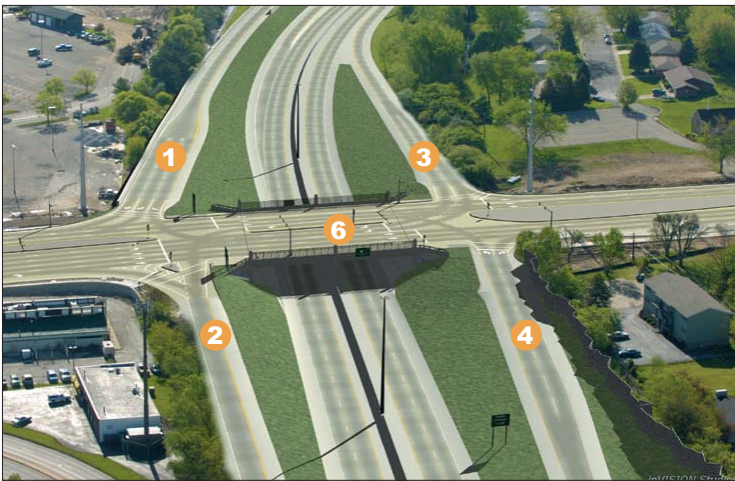
Artwork courtesy of THOMAS WALDSCHMIDT of inVISION Studios

IN THE ZONE: A PREVIEW OF THE STERLING AVENUE I-74 PROJECT

TOP: This aerial photograph, taken in May, looks east along Interstate 74 from just west of the Sterling Avenue overpass. The northbound half of the overpass is under construction, while southbound lanes already have been rebuilt. At each corner of the intersection, work has started on new ramps to be built in 2005 and '06.



BELOW: A computer rendering placed over the same photograph shows what Interstate 74 will look like when reconstruction ends in 2006.



- 1) New westbound exit ramp provides two lanes to northbound Sterling Avenue (at Northwoods Mall) and one to southbound Sterling.
- 2) New westbound entrance ramp from Sterling.
- 3) New eastbound entrance ramp from Sterling.
- 4) New eastbound exit ramp to Sterling.
- 5) Sterling expands to six lanes, not counting turn lanes, over rebuilt bridge.

Photographs by **MATT DAYHOFF** of the Journal Star
Artwork courtesy of **THOMAS WALDSCHMIDT** of inVISION Studios

New Sterling link to mall is good as gold

By **MATT BUEDEL** of the Journal Star

PEORIA — The McMorrow family can't go anywhere without running into construction. Their quickest northbound route along Sterling Avenue is inundated with orange barrels. They can't take the easiest way out of their neighborhood — via Gale Avenue — without driving through part or all of the work zone at that interchange with Interstate 74.

They also can't sleep late at their North Wilson Drive home, situated directly above the Gale on-ramp to eastbound I-74. "When you go out in the back yard and you're trying to have a cookout, you're just listening to (the work) constantly," Mary McMorrow said. "I think it's driving the whole neighborhood nuts."

Unfortunately, they have a couple more nerve-jangling years to go. The work the McMorrow's witness each day is part of Upgrade 74's first phase, which ends in November. The entire project stretches to the end of 2006.



The Gale Avenue overpass and adjoining ramps, as well as other overpasses in that area, are being reconstructed because the structures have lasted beyond their life expectancy, according to Illinois Department of Transportation construction engineer Matt Jeréb.

Other work in the area west of Downtown — between Sterling and Ellis Street — prepares surrounding roads for more traffic and builds sections of road that will be completed in future phases of Upgrade 74.

Sterling between War Memorial Drive and Overhill Road is being widened to six lanes to facilitate traffic flow around Northwoods Mall and accommodate new ramps to I-74.

"The reason we're (widening Sterling) is we want to have a new interchange built when (the entire project) is complete," Jeréb said.

Access to the interstate at Sterling will give a different route to traffic that typically exits I-74

at War Memorial to reach Northwoods Mall. Those motorists now must cross two lanes of fast-moving traffic to turn left onto Scenic Drive.

Interstate access at Sterling "gets rid of that weaving action by Scenic," Jeréb said.

The new Sterling interchange, which will be operational with two permanent and two temporary ramps by the end of 2005, also will allow the War Memorial interchange to shut down for reconstruction in 2006.

IDOT resident engineer Steve Dietz manages day-to-day operations for the first phase of construction west of Downtown, including Sterling Avenue and the reconstruction of overpasses at Broadway Street, Sheridan Road and Ellis Street. Those bridges will be complete by mid-November.

New bridges at University Street and Gale also will be complete by mid-November, but renovated ramps at those interchanges face different time lines. Gale's ramps will be finished when the overpass there is complete this year. University's eastbound on-and-off-ramps get reconstructed in 2005, while its west-bound counterparts will be built in 2006.

The most challenging engineering endeavor, Dietz said, is the precision required by forming aesthetic elements, such as the stone-like facades on overpasses and textured retaining walls lining on-and-off-ramps.

"The sheer volume of work going on — that's more just in my portion of the contract than we do in a year in the entire district," Dietz said. "It doesn't do it justice just trying to build it in your mind."