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Ultimate makeover of Interstate 4 getting closer

Joe Burbank. Orlando Sentinel

By **Dan Tracy**, Orlando Sentinel
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As you crawl along Interstate 4 on your way to or from work today, you may notice some people wearing bright vests and digging holes by the side of the road.

They represent the leading edge of the \$2.3 billion makeover of I-4 that won't be complete until sometime in 2021.

The soil samples will determine how much weight the ground can handle without collapsing under what is planned to be a bigger, wider, much improved highway.

The real heavy work, however, likely will begin in earnest by March, when the big machines roll into place and start moving around dirt.

That undoubtedly will occur near the interchange with State Road 408 in downtown and move out across the 21-mile expanse of the so-called "I-4 Ultimate" undertaking, said Loreen Bobo, who is overseeing the project for the state Department of Transportation.

"Pretty much from Day 1," she said, work will center on downtown, even though the boundaries stretch as far west as Kirkman Road in Orange County and to State Road 434 in Seminole County to the east.

Everything starts in downtown because much of I-4 is elevated there, which is more challenging and time-consuming for construction crews than working on the ground. The 408 interchange represents a complex configuration made even more difficult because it must accommodate cars going from toll lanes to free ones.

The key feature of the I-4 overhaul is the addition of four toll lanes down the middle of the interstate. Bobo said the new I-4 is being designed so people riding in the toll lanes can get to the 408 — also a toll road — without having to mix in with the free traffic.

Motorists, she said, can anticipate lanes being shifted for construction during the day, with barricades and temporary concrete walls showing the way. Lanes will be closed as well, but only at night, typically from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m.

The idea is to try and keep congestion and traffic delays at a minimum during the morning and evening peak commutes, when a majority of the nearly 200,000 vehicles I-4 draws each workday are on the road.

But Bobo concedes backups and slowdowns will be inevitable.

"I'm hoping it won't be too drastic," she said, "but when people see barrels and barrier walls, they'll slow down. And that's not a bad thing."

Motorists already are seeing lanes closed at night on I-4 near Lake Mary, but that work is not related to the pending overhaul. It is normal maintenance, with a nearly 2.3-mile stretch being repaved at a cost of almost \$3.3 million. It should be complete early next year.

The slowing speeds of the ultimate project, however, may cause many to flee I-4, some heading for the SunRail commuter train that roughly parallels the road and links DeBary in Volusia County through downtown to south Orange County. Another possibility is that I-4 refugees will flock to other roads, such as U.S. Highway 17-92, John Young Parkway and Edgewater Drive.

Eric Kuritzky, who has lived in Central Florida and driven its roads for more than 30 years, expects a mess.

"It will be a challenge for an awful lot of people," said Kuritzky, 63, an architect who tries to avoid I-4, especially during the morning and evening rush hours.

But even Kuritzky occasionally gets on the most heavily traveled road in Central Florida.

"I look at the people around me and say, 'Really? You do this voluntarily to yourselves?' " said Kuritzky, who lives and works in south Orlando.

Bobo said I-4 was built for cars to go 50 mph when it opened in 1965. Once the ultimate makeover is complete, she said, the intention is that motorists will be able to drive 60 mph, in part because the four toll lanes will provide relief to the three "free" lanes going in either direction.

Some of the road's curves and undulations, particularly the infamous Fairbanks curve — the site of numerous accidents just north of downtown — also will be softened, giving the road a flatter, straighter line for drivers.

The work will be done by a consortium known as I-4 Mobility Partners, led by the Swedish conglomerate Skanska Infrastructure and John Laing of England, and overseen by the state.

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