

I-4 ultimate makeover officially begins Sunday

By **Dan Tracy**
Orlando Sentinel

FEBRUARY 2, 2015, 9:43 AM

At least six years of construction officially began 12:01 a.m. Sunday on Interstate 4. But commuters don't need to worry just yet: It will be a few weeks before they have to deal with mind-numbing congestion.

The moment the clock turned to Sunday is when I-4 Mobility Partners took charge of the \$2.3 billion overhaul of Metro Orlando's main transportation spine, according to a document signed by state and company officials. Known as a "notice to proceed," it basically put the private consortium on the clock.

I-4 Mobility will construct four toll lanes down the middle of the highway, as well as add other improvements, in a project that is supposed to be complete by March 2021. Here's what drivers need to know.

Will it affect my Monday-morning commute?

Not yet. The notice to proceed essentially signals the start of preliminary chores, such as setting mileage markers along the road to let workers know where to show up for each day's job and installing plastic shields near lakes to protect them from runoff. It also brings on a new maintenance contractor to cut the grass and remove disabled vehicles from travel lanes.

When will drivers be affected?

Late in February or sometime in March is when low-slung concrete dividing walls should be placed along the road to separate workers and machinery from traffic. Although no lanes will be closed during the day and, most importantly, morning and evening rush hours, the walls will make many of the auxiliary lanes off limits. Since that's where vehicles that break down are moved, even a minor accident could cause major backups. Even without a mishap, the walls tend to naturally slow traffic, which could lead to congestion.

When will the heavy construction start?

Probably by the summer. Just like preparing an army for a major campaign, it takes time to assemble the work crews and get all the equipment in place. Construction project schedules are fluid, so hard dates are difficult to obtain.

Where will the work occur?

The overhaul, led by the international conglomerate Skanska and the John Laing company, will take place over a 21-mile corridor, from Kirkman Road in the west, through downtown Orlando, to State Road 434 in the east.

Where will the most intense construction be?

Downtown will bear the brunt because much of the road is elevated 16 feet above ground and the major interchange with State Road 408 will be redone. That junction alone could take at least three years to complete. Other stretches of highway are largely at-grade, making the work less complex.

What roads could serve as alternate routes to I-4?

From the east, try taking U.S. Highway 17-92. It roughly parallels I-4 and goes from Sanford into Orlando at State Road 50, northeast of downtown. John Young Parkway is another possibility. It links with Lee Road near Winter Park, and runs south to near Kissimmee in Osceola County.

From the west, try taking John Young Parkway, picking it up in Kissimmee at U.S. Highway 192. Orange Avenue is another option. It goes from the Osceola County line just southwest of Orlando International Airport all the way into downtown.

State Road 417 could work too. The toll road runs from Sanford all the way to just south of Orlando International Airport.

The problem with each route is they are not as direct as I-4 and they often are congested. There are lots of traffic lights as well, SR 417 being the exception.

What about riding SunRail?

The main reason the state and local governments created the commuter-train system was to give I-4 commuters another way to get to and from work once the highway overhaul began. SunRail has 12 stations along a 31.5-mile route that links DeBary in Volusia County with downtown Winter Park, Orlando and south Orange County. A one-way ticket costs \$2, plus \$1 for each additional county.

dltracy@tribune.com or 407-420-5444.

Copyright © 2015, Orlando Sentinel
