

Interstate 4 work mostly on periphery – for now

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Orlando Sentinel

SEPTEMBER 4, 2015, 9:54 AM

Accidents, heavy rains and inexplicable slowdowns aside, traffic continues to roll normally on Interstate 4 — even though the \$2.3 billion rebuild of the highway started six months ago.

One of the main reasons for the essentially minor impact so far is that the vast majority of the action is on the sidelines of Metro Orlando's main transportation artery.

"A lot of the work is going on on the outside," said Loreen Bobo, who is overseeing the so-called I-4 Ultimate for the state Department of Transportation.

Roads and land running alongside the interstate are bearing the brunt of the construction because that is setting the stage for the really hard stuff ahead: the massive overhaul of 15 interchanges and addition of four toll lanes down the middle of the road.

Right now, ditches are being dug and drainage is being redirected, utility lines are being moved and streets that connect with, or run underneath, I-4 are being widened or rerouted.

A prime example was the lane shift last month on Maitland Boulevard, when the eastbound lanes from the State Road 434 entrance to the Keller Road intersection were shifted to the median, a distance of about three-quarters of a mile.

Workers are rebuilding the Maitland I-4 interchange, as well as constructing a pedestrian bridge and elevating Maitland Boulevard over streets west of the interchange through Maitland Summit Boulevard.

Retiree Richard Kohs of Winter Park drives by Maitland Boulevard regularly on his way to play bridge with friends in Altamonte Springs. He takes Wymore Road to avoid I-4.

So far, Kohs said, his commute has not been affected, although he typically drives during the late morning and midafternoon, when traffic often is minimal.

"It is never crowded," he wrote in an email.

Lyndol Michael, who lives near the University of Central Florida, said he often rides on S.R. 408, which links with I-4 and is set for a major redo. That work has not started in earnest yet, so the biggest impact of the I-4 overhaul for Michael was the closing earlier this summer of one Lake Ivanhoe Boulevard exit into the College Park neighborhood just north of downtown.

The land around the Lake Ivanhoe exit is being used for a staging area and, eventually, will provide a direct link to the toll lanes when they open.

"My church, some friends and meetings are in the College Park area," said Michael, who is forced to use the Princeton Street exit instead.

She also is not happy with all the trees and foliage that were ripped out near I-4.

"The impact of leveling trees and disturbance of wildlife habitats are often ignored or given minor consideration," she said.

Plans call for the state and its private contractor, SGL Constructors, to spend \$40 million on landscaping and aesthetic improvements to the highway, including the planting of 14,500 trees along the 21 miles covered by the project.

But that work likely will come toward the end of the venture, which is not supposed to be complete until 2021.

By following what is known as a design-build process, SGL has decided to tackle the smaller, side jobs first. That means working from the outside in, Bobo said.

A prime example is New Hampshire Street in College Park, where steel girders are being driven into the ground. They will serve as the support beams when the road is widened.

South Westmoreland Drive was closed during the day for a month beneath the 408 as workers prepared the toll-road construction that will revamp the entire interchange with I-4.

The 408 connection is one of the most "critical" jobs during the Ultimate, Bobo said, because the existing interchange is outdated and overwhelmed daily by traffic.

"We're going to be there to the very end," she said.

She predicted construction on interstate pavement likely will start within a few months, leading to lane shifts and, quite possibly, more congestion than the road typically hosts.

SGL, she said, has seven trucks riding up and down the boundaries of the I-4 Ultimate, roughly from Kirkman Road to the west and S.R. 434 to the east, looking to assist motorists who are broken down. The number of Road Rangers will rise by three by the end of the month in anticipation of more road work.

"All they care about," she said, "is, 'Are the lanes open?' and to keep traffic moving."

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An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated the name of a motorist on Interstate 4.

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