

Ultimate fix on I-4 construction will be 408 interchange



By [Dan Tracy](#) Orlando Sentinel [contact the reporter](#)

Everybody talks about the toll lanes planned for the middle of Interstate 4, but the most lasting benefit that will come from the massive "ultimate" overhaul through downtown Orlando promises to be the new, rebuilt interchange with State Road 408.

S.R. 408 is where I-4 traffic in downtown Orlando bogs down the worst, seemingly backed up in both directions during most waking hours.

The congestion is caused by an outdated 1970s design, which forces drivers coming from both north and southbound directions on I-4 to slow nearly to a

stop as they weave amongst themselves while attempting to go either east or west on S.R. 408.

"I hate that interchange," said John Porter, an insurance salesman who often travels I-4 and the 408. "There's always something going on, cars to the right, cars to the left."

Engineers say the connection was never meant to handle the 80,000 vehicles often crawling along its so-called trumpet-like design after they exit I-4.

That bottleneck, along with the entire, highly banked interchange, will go away and be replaced with a set of on and off ramps, or flyovers, linking the interstate with 408.

Sounds simple enough, but the work — which could begin in a few weeks — will consume six years, or every single day set aside for the entire makeover.

"However long the Ultimate will take, this project will take," said Jon Walker, program project manager for SGL Constructors, which is renovating I-4 under the supervision of the state Department of Transportation.

Porter, who was pleased to learn of the interchange's eventual demise, was not happy about the timetable.

"Are you kidding me?" he said. "Six years?"

The interchange is expected to cost roughly \$650 million, with \$230 million coming from the Central Florida Expressway Authority, the owner and operator of 408, which is a toll road.

That price tag is close to 20 percent of the entire \$2.3 billion budget of the project, which covers 21 miles, from Kirkman Road to the south and State Road 434 to the north.

When complete, the interchange will involve five levels of road, with one ramp — westbound I-4 traffic to westbound 408 — towering 100 feet in the air, or about as high as the [Amway Center](#) just to the west of the interstate.

Some 250,000 cubic yards of concrete will be poured at that interchange and through what engineers call Area 2, from just south of the Orange Blossom Trail to a little north of Colonial Drive, or State Road 50.

That's enough concrete to fill 77 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

The S.R. 408 rebuild will be done in several stages that essentially stretch from next month into late 2020 or early 2021. The individual jobs will last anywhere from two months to 46 months, according to a schedule created by SGL, the construction arm of the consortium that was chosen by the state to overhaul I-4.

The first task calls for adding an extra lane to westbound S.R. 408 from near I-4 to Tampa Avenue. That will help accommodate a temporary on-ramp to the 408 that will be relocated from Orange Avenue, just south of City Hall, to Division Avenue.

The 408 bridge over I-4 will be tackled next year, in part because some of the pillars holding it up now have to be moved for the addition of the four toll lanes.

That work calls for moving traffic from side to side, depending on which direction is being redone. The bridge work will not be complete until sometime in 2018.

David Ballard, who is overseeing Area 2 for SGL, said one of the challenges facing workers is the fact that I-4 must stay open and carry traffic while construction occurs. The project, he said, might be completed in half the time — roughly three years — if the road could be closed while the work occurs.

But since I-4 is the region's main transportation artery, no one considered shutting it down.

Construction of the new ramps will start this year and last all the way into 2019. They actually will "fly over" parts of I-4 with long straightaways and gentle curves before getting to 408.

Ballard said that design allows cars and trucks to drive faster than they can with the circular trumpet loop now tormenting drivers at 408.

"Not just a higher-speed facility," he predicted, "but a safer facility."

Eventually, the old ramps will be demolished, as will the steep, 20-foot-high embankment that partially encloses the Griffin Park public housing units to the west of I-4.

Porter, for one, cannot wait.

"I'd like to find the guy that designed it in the first place," he said, "and ask him what he was thinking."

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