

I-4 construction: Are we there yet?

\$2.3 billion project now 35 percent complete, officials say

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ORLANDO, Fla. - Drivers, brace yourself for this number: 747 days.

That's how many days we have spent either hearing about, dealing with or driving through construction along a 21-mile stretch of I-4.

It's called the I-4 Ultimate Project. News 6 dubbed it the Big Drive.

The \$2.3 billion project broke ground two years ago, on Feb. 17, 2015, shortly after a notice to proceed was issued by the Florida Department of Transportation.

According to officials with I-4 Ultimate, construction is 35 percent complete of the total contract time, and workers are on schedule to complete the job in 2021.

No need to bust out the calendar: There are four years to go, with some key milestones to look forward to in the near future, starting with the Maitland area.

Drivers in Maitland have noticed the most changes. Big Drive construction crews have moved nearly all the ramps at the interchange. Construction in Maitland is scheduled to be complete in 2018.

The new Grand National overpass near the attractions is another spot that has changed drastically. Construction workers told News 6 that they expect to have it open for traffic by this fall.

As work continues to ramp up, News 6 decided to take a trip down memory lane.

The first phase of Big Drive construction involved preparation, including more warning signs, clearing vegetation and creating erosion zones to keep dirt and debris off the road.

Four months after groundbreaking, the I-4 Ultimate Project made its first major closure at Ivanhoe Boulevard near downtown Orlando. The exit ramp closed permanently in June 2015.

Since construction began, the journey has brought some surprises dating back to April 2015.

Construction crews came across a small puppy trapped in a storm drain near the Kaley exit. The puppy was adopted by the worker who found it and was named Kaley.

In March 2016, work was halted near the Ivanhoe exit after crews discovered an osprey nest on a sign scheduled to be removed. Crews consulted with environmental experts and followed guidelines by building a new nest for the bird in the surrounding area.

What's next? The I-4 Ultimate Project is expected to bring new challenges in the coming years. The clock is ticking as crews tackle the addition of new tolled express lanes in each direction, the replacement of more than 140 bridges and the reconfiguration of 15 major interchanges.

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