

Officials: I-84 widening cost may increase

Getting there: Technical factors, safety issues make complicate planned improvements

By Dan Black
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TREASURE VALLEY — Adding a third lane in both directions of Interstate 84 from Meridian to Nampa is getting a little more complicated.

As engineers move to finish up their concept stage and enter the design phase, they are discovering specific challenges that could increase the project's cost, said Connecting Idaho Program Manager David Butzier. "We haven't finalized most questions," he said. "But we're getting close."

Butzier said the six-mile job is complicated because of three large issues.

First, the grade, or angle of the existing road, sometimes doesn't lend itself to a simple added third lane because water could accumulate. In some cases, he said, the grade of the entire road will need to be changed for adequate drainage. And some areas could require drainage grates and pipes to move water away from the interstate. Standing water on a roadway is unsafe for motorists and will damage the road, Butzier said.

The second concern is to keep traffic moving during construction. About 74,000 vehicles travel the route each day and construction historically distracts motorists, who slow down to see what's going on.

Idaho Transportation Department spokesman Jeff Stratten said much of the work will be done at night, so there won't be much to look at during the day.

Butzier said at some construction sites, a barrier is erected to shield the construction zone from motorists' view.

That option would likely be too expensive for this project, Stratten said.

Working at night, crews will close off one lane, Butzier said, until 5 or 6 a.m., when both lanes will re-open for commuters.

The third concern has to do with resurfacing the existing lanes. Butzier said ruts have developed within the past year that need to be fixed.

He said that about 10 to 15 years ago, crews laid 2 1/2 inches of material on Interstate 84 that has recently degraded.

"Even as little as a year ago," he said, "we thought maybe a thin overlay on both lanes would be the easiest and quickest way" to deal with the existing lanes.

The ruts are a problem, though, and the top layer must now be "milled" or removed and fresh material laid down.

All three issues could mean the project is more costly than expected.

"We don't have the final numbers yet," Butzier said.

He said \$40 million for the widening project has been approved by the Legislature through the "Connecting Idaho" program, which uses bonds paid off by federal highway money allocations.

The widening project was previously estimated at about \$67 million and the ITD will ask the Legislature for more money to finish the widening.

This winter the ITD will gather more public comment, Stratten said. And engineers will move into the design stage, Butzier said. Work could begin in the fall of 2007 and likely will conclude in the fall of 2009, Butzier said.

He works for Washington Group International, one of the two large companies the ITD selected to manage its "Connecting Idaho" program.

The other partner is CH2M Hill, another construction and engineering firm.

Stratton said the ITD will have oversight of all Connecting Idaho projects, but the state selected the private companies to handle most management duties.

Daily I-84 traffic estimates from Garrity Boulevard to Meridian Road:

1995 — 54,000

2000 — 66,000

2006 — 74,000

2010 — 82,000

2020 — 106,000

2030 — 138,000

Other parts of Connecting Idaho relating to I-84 include the following projects:

Rebuilding the westbound Eagle Road off-ramp.

Study of the entire I-84 corridor from Caldwell to Five Mile Road.

Study of extending Idaho 16 south to I-84 between Nampa and Meridian.

Build a new interchange at Ten Mile Road