

IMPROVE 81

Winter 2024

81 INSIDER

New Construction Coming In 2024

Motorists using Interstate 81 in Virginia will drive through multiple work zones beginning in 2024. Several large projects in the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP) are scheduled to go under construction this year. Here's what you can expect:

A Staunton District

The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) in October 2023 awarded a \$7.7 million contract to Fairfield-Echols LLC for construction of an I-81 southbound auxiliary lane in Augusta County. The auxiliary lane will connect exit 221 (I-64 junction) with exit 220 (Route 262 south) in the Staunton area. This improvement will create an additional lane between the two interchanges and provide additional space for merging traffic from I-64 to I-81.

The project requires replacement of the Route 635 (Barterbrook Road) bridge over I-81. Route 635 closed to through traffic in late November 2023, allowing demolition work to begin. The new bridge will be built in the same location in order to reduce construction cost and duration. It's expected to open in spring 2025. The I-81 southbound auxiliary lane should be ready for traffic a few months later.

A work-zone speed limit of 60 miles per hour is in place along I-81 northbound and southbound in the area of the auxiliary lane project. Interstate drivers should be alert

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Contractors preparing for removal of existing Route 635 bridge over I-81

New Construction Coming In 2024 (continued)

overnight lane closures during some phases of construction.

Right next to the auxiliary lane project, design-build contractor Kokosing Construction is widening a four-mile stretch of I-81 northbound and southbound. Kokosing performed shoulder-strengthening work in late 2023, and will begin building a third lane in each direction in spring 2024. The \$101 million project is between exits 221 and 225 (Route 262 north) and includes the widening of five bridges.

Much of the work on the Staunton-area widening will take place behind concrete barriers, but I-81 motorists should be alert for overnight lane closures throughout the four-year project.

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Upcoming Major Projects

Two more major projects in the Staunton District are scheduled to be advertised in summer 2024, and could be under construction by the end of the year:



TRUCK-CLIMBING LANES:

Northbound and southbound I-81 truck-climbing lanes between mile markers 234 and 238 near the Augusta-Rockingham county line



WIDENING:

Southbound I-81 widening in the Strasburg area, between exit 300 (I-66 junction) and exit 296 (Route 55)



Shoulder strengthening in advance of widening I-81 in the Staunton area

New Construction Coming In 2024 (continued)

Bristol District

The widening of southbound I-81 in the Bristol area is expected to go under construction in early 2024. The CTB in December 2023 awarded a \$30.7 million contract to W-L Construction & Paving Inc. to add a third lane between exit 10 (Route 11/19) and exit 7 (Old Airport Road/Bonham Road). The project includes widening of the I-81 southbound bridge over Old Dominion Road and an additional lane along a one-mile stretch of northbound I-81.






Widening of I-81 in the Bristol area is scheduled to begin in early 2024

Wytheville Area

Three projects combined in a single construction contract will bring a variety of improvements to the Wytheville area. The CTB awarded the \$53.6 million contract to Branch Civil Inc. in December 2023, and construction should begin in early 2024.




The work includes two I-81 CIP projects and a local SMART SCALE project:

-  A new southbound I-81 auxiliary lane between exit 73 (Route 11) and exit 72 (I-77 junction)
-  Northbound I-77 interchange improvements at exit 41 (Peppers Ferry Road)
-  Construction of new connector road for Progress Park industrial development

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New Construction Coming In 2024 (continued)

Also in the Wytheville area, a separate design-build contract is scheduled to be awarded in spring 2024 for several additional improvements:

-  Extensions to two interchange ramps at the junction of I-81 and I-77
-  A new auxiliary lane between southbound I-77 exit 41 and the ramp to southbound I-81
-  Replacement of the I-81 northbound and southbound bridges over Peppers Ferry Road and the northbound I-81 bridge over the I-77 northbound ramp

Construction is tentatively scheduled to be under way by late 2024.



Several projects around the junction of I-81 and I-77 at Wytheville begin in 2024



The People Behind the Projects: Brenda Willis, Salem District Environmental Division

Meet some of the VDOT team members who offer expertise, dedication, and innovative thinking to the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP). Our winter 2024 profile is Brenda Willis, assistant environmental manager for VDOT's Salem District. Brenda plays an important role in environmental regulation for infrastructure projects.

How have you been involved with the I-81 CIP?

As the assistant environmental manager, I provide support needed to complete the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents for I-81 improvement projects. Before we can do that, we determine what endangered species are in the project area. For example, is it likely or unlikely that those species will be affected? The response will determine what level of document is written and how we can minimize potential impacts. We use everybody's knowledge to figure out the best path forward. We monitor every project that has been identified as having environmental commitments. Environmental touches every project whether it's replacing a pipe or paving a road – we get involved in everything. Our job is never done.

How will these projects benefit drivers on the interstate?

With these other lanes, we'll have a little more wiggle room to get around. I think it will help the congestion, and when we do have crashes, it will give emergency vehicles more room to get where they need to go. Adding those extra lanes and moving people through more efficiently are essential.

Describe how working on the CIP has been different or unique from other projects you have worked on.

Under our traditional process, VDOT develops and delivers the project from plan to pavement. The I-81 CIP includes several design-build projects. In these cases, VDOT only develops 30% plans and then turns it over to the selected design-build contractor to complete the design and construct the project. From an environmental perspective, this means we are only doing preliminary coordination. Then it becomes the responsibility of the design-build contractor, not VDOT, to obtain the necessary environmental permits to complete the project.

What is the biggest challenge of your involvement with the CIP?

The biggest challenge is trying to make it less complicated for contractors to build the project and be compliant with environmental laws and regulations. Many of these projects are built by a single contractor that completes both the design and construction phases. This means we have to anticipate all the potential environmental impacts before having the final design plans completed.

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People Behind the Projects (continued)

What have you enjoyed the most about working on these projects?

Working on these projects has allowed me to collaborate with new people and come up with new ideas. It's amazing how you can have three contractors, and each has a different way of doing the same thing. I've been with VDOT a long time, so I've seen a lot of changes. Technology has really increased the efficiency of getting our job done.

Improve81 Project Updates

Bristol District

A new truck-climbing lane in southwest Virginia opened in late 2023, and contractors have already started work on two more.

W-L Construction & Paving Inc. is building all three of the climbing lanes in Smyth and Washington counties. They will help improve traffic flow and safety on steep grades where commercial vehicles may struggle to maintain interstate speeds. The three projects have a combined construction cost of about \$24.9 million.

The first truck-climbing lane extends 1.3 miles on northbound I-81 just north of exit 39 at Seven Mile Ford in Smyth County. Construction on the project began in fall 2022 and the truck-climbing lane opened to traffic in late November 2023.

W-L has started work on northbound I-81 just past exit 32 (Chilhowie), and on southbound I-81 at mile marker 34 near the Smyth-Washington county line. Both projects are about a mile long, and require 24/7 right shoulder closures with concrete barriers separating traffic from the work zone. Final completion of these two truck-climbing lanes is scheduled for fall 2025.

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Drivers using the new truck-climbing lane just north of exit 39



Early work on the southbound I-81 truck-climbing lane in Washington County

Improve81 Project Updates (continued)

Salem District

The first widening project in the I-81 CIP has reached the halfway point. Archer Western Construction is building a third lane northbound and southbound between exit 137 (Route 112) and exit 141 (Route 419). The Salem-area project also replaces or widens eight bridges, improves some interchanges and builds 2.6 miles of noise-barrier wall. In some areas of this work zone, I-81 traffic is already using new travel lanes and newly-constructed portions of some bridges. The \$179 million project is scheduled for final completion in early 2026. Over the final two years of construction, motorists should be alert for 24/7 shoulder closures, traffic-lane shifts and overnight single-lane closures.



Salem-area widening work includes paving operations and construction of a permanent center barrier

The I-81 CIP's largest project will add a third lane northbound and southbound in Roanoke and Botetourt counties, between exit 143 (I-581 junction) and exit 150 (Route 220). In mid-2024 VDOT plans to hire a design-build contractor to oversee design and engineering work, utility relocation and construction. The \$479 million project will include replacement of eight bridges as well as interchange modifications at exit 150. Construction is tentatively scheduled to start in mid-to-late 2025.



I-81 widening between Roanoke and Troutville is scheduled to start in the second half of 2025



Keep in Touch

Have a question or comment regarding the I-81 CIP? Connect with VDOT's Improve81 communications team!

CONTACT THE VDOT CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTER (24/7/365)

- VDOT Customer Service app: <https://my.vdot.virginia.gov/>
- vdotinfo@vdot.virginia.gov
- 1-800-FOR ROAD
(1-800-367-7623)

An agent will answer your questions and/or forward your questions and comments with contact information you provide to the appropriate I-81 CIP team member.

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For access to I-81 VDOT district Twitter feeds, regional 511 traffic feeds, overall district news and district traffic alerts, visit [Improve81.org/contact-us](https://www.improve81.org/contact-us).

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