

# IMPROVE 81

Spring 2024

## 81 INSIDER

### Major New Project Joins Improve81

The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) has added a new widening to the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP), while three other projects have seen significant changes.

At its December 2023 meeting, the CTB updated the program with the widening of southbound I-81 between exit 137 (Salem) and exit 128 (Ironto). The roughly \$308 million project, located in Roanoke and Montgomery counties, will add a third travel lane and replace several bridges.

Following a series of traffic studies and public meetings in 2018, the I-81 Corridor Improvement Plan identified 106 potential construction projects. Among them were the northbound and southbound widening projects between exits 128 and 137. The northbound widening was among 64 projects selected for funding. It is in the early stages of design and engineering, and is scheduled to begin construction in 2025.

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**Southbound I-81 traffic near exit 132 in Roanoke County**

## Major New Project Joins Improve81 (continued)

The CTB has directed VDOT to advance the southbound widening concurrently with the northbound widening. Together they will become the largest single project in the I-81 CIP.

“This will be a significant and much-needed improvement for that portion of the interstate,” says I-81 Program Delivery Director Dave Covington. “We also expect to save taxpayers about \$75 million by combining the northbound and southbound widening under a single contract.”

The CTB has also directed that two more widening projects be added to the I-81 CIP. One adds a third lane northbound and southbound near the city of Winchester between exits 313 and 317. The other is

in Montgomery County on northbound I-81 between mile marker 116 (Christiansburg area) and exit 128 (Ironto). The Winchester widening will go to construction first, followed by the Christiansburg-to-Ironto project. Both of these projects will advance when revenue and financing allow.

Finally, a shoulder-improvement project has transformed into a full widening. The CIP originally included widening the shoulders on portions of northbound and southbound I-81 in Rockbridge County. The project now calls for a full third lane southbound between exit 205 (Raphine) and exit 200 (Fairfield). Construction is expected to begin in 2028.



*Surveying is part of the design and engineering work for widening I-81 southbound in Rockbridge County*



## The People Behind the Projects: Brian Plummer, Bristol District Area Construction Engineer

Meet some of the VDOT team members who offer expertise, dedication, and innovative thinking to the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP). Our spring 2024 profile is Brian Plummer, ACE for the VDOT Bristol District's Central Region. Brian has served with VDOT for 11 years, and has 10 years of previous experience with the Missouri Department of Transportation. He and his wife, Kristy, live on a small farm with three horses, six dogs, and many ducks. They have a grown son, Ethan, who works in construction as a carpenter.

### What I-81 CIP projects are you currently involved in?

I am working on the Interstate 81 widening project from exit 7 to exit 10 (at Bristol) and the truck-climbing lane projects in Washington County, located northbound near mile marker 32 and southbound near mile marker 34.

### What do you look forward to most about the changes that are happening on I-81?

I am excited about how these changes will improve safety and reduce traffic congestion along the I-81 corridor.

### What has been the biggest challenge of the I-81 CIP?

A big challenge for construction is staying within the restrictions on allowable working hours (generally nighttime and overnight) to complete projects along the corridor. We try to keep traffic moving efficiently through our work zones.

### Describe how working on the I-81 CIP differs from other projects.

Due to the heavy daily traffic volumes along the interstate, and especially heavy truck traffic, maintaining traffic flow is paramount on these projects. Work zones are challenging, and any crashes can create major backups.

### What are some of the items taken into consideration when working on CIP projects in your district?

Traffic, paving restrictions during winter months, and time-of-year restrictions for items such as cutting down trees to protect threatened and endangered species. All of these must also be taken into consideration when we are working on I-81 CIP projects.

### How do the projects that you work on benefit the I-81 CIP and the drivers on the interstate?

The I-81 projects have a major impact on drivers, especially those who frequently travel the corridor and encounter multiple work zones. The I-81 CIP will go a long way in helping improve safety and reduce traffic congestion for those drivers very soon.

### What have you enjoyed the most about working on the I-81 CIP?

The complexity and challenges of building these projects on time and within budget is rewarding, especially when the work you've been doing is finished and you get to see the positive impact firsthand. I also enjoy the team effort and the collaboration between VDOT, consultants and contractors.

## Improve81 Construction Updates

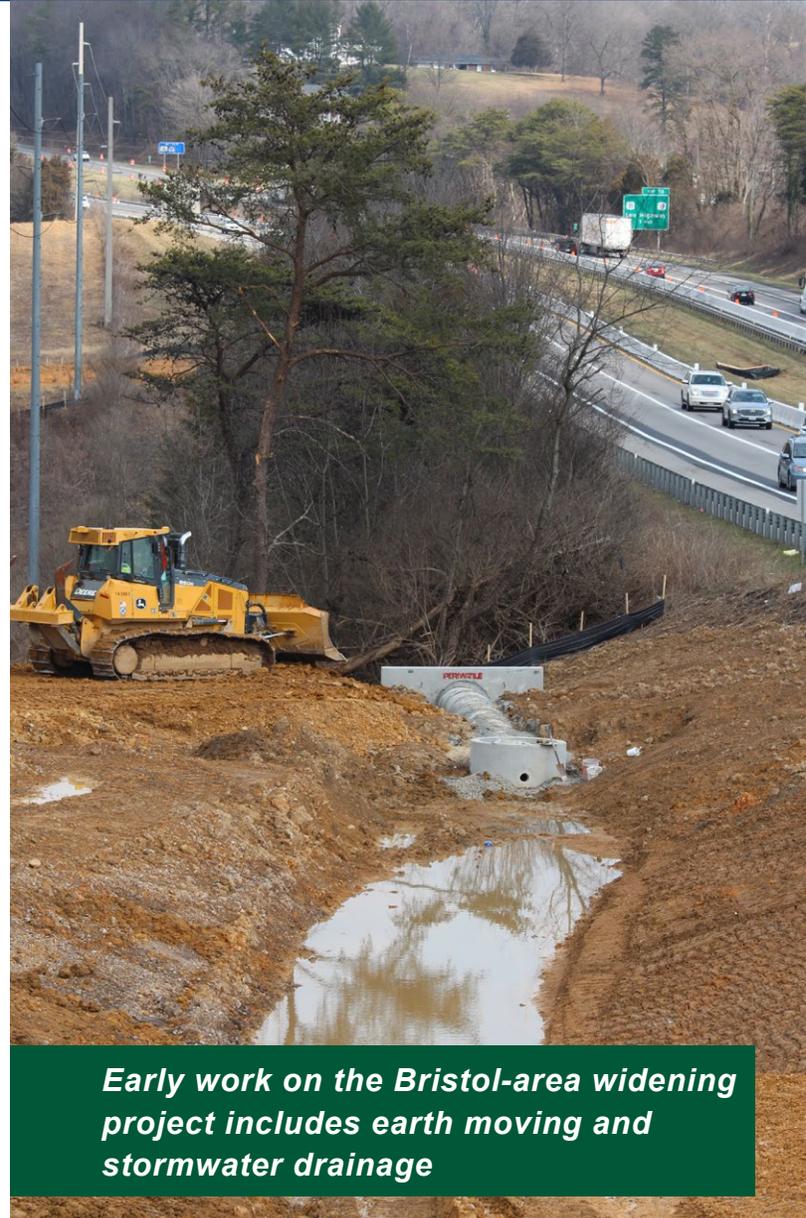
### Bristol District

#### Exit 1 to Exit 86

At the beginning of 2024, contractors started work on a \$30.7 million project to improve safety and traffic flow near the city of Bristol. W-L Construction & Paving Inc. is building a third southbound lane between exit 10 (Route 11/19) and exit 7 (Old Airport Road/Bonham Road). The project also includes widening of the southbound I-81 bridge over Old Dominion Road, and a one-mile extension of the existing third lane on northbound I-81. The project is scheduled for completion in November 2025.

During early stages of work, crews have been clearing brush and trees, grading along southbound I-81, and installing stormwater basins. Concrete barriers separate work areas from I-81 traffic, but motorists should be alert for shoulder closures and heavy equipment moving in and out of the work zone. When contractors begin bridge work, a temporary signal will control traffic on Old Dominion Road.

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*Early work on the Bristol-area widening project includes earth moving and stormwater drainage*



## Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

W-L Construction & Paving is also working near the Washington-Smyth county line on a pair of new truck-climbing lanes. Both projects will help improve safety and traffic flow on steep grades where tractor trailers and other commercial vehicles may struggle to maintain interstate speed. The additional lanes will each be about a mile long, located on northbound I-81 just north of exit 32 (Chilhowie) and on southbound I-81 beginning at mile marker 34.

Since mobilizing in late 2023, contractors have been working on excavation and installing erosion and sediment controls. They have also started work on stormwater drainage structures and retaining walls that will border both truck-climbing lanes. Both new lanes are scheduled for completion in November 2025 at a cost of about \$17.2 million. During construction, northbound and southbound I-81 drivers will have right-shoulder closures through the work zones.

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***I-81 Northbound traffic moves through the truck-climbing lane work zone***



***Earth-moving will create space for a new truck-climbing lane along southbound I-81***

## Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

### Salem District

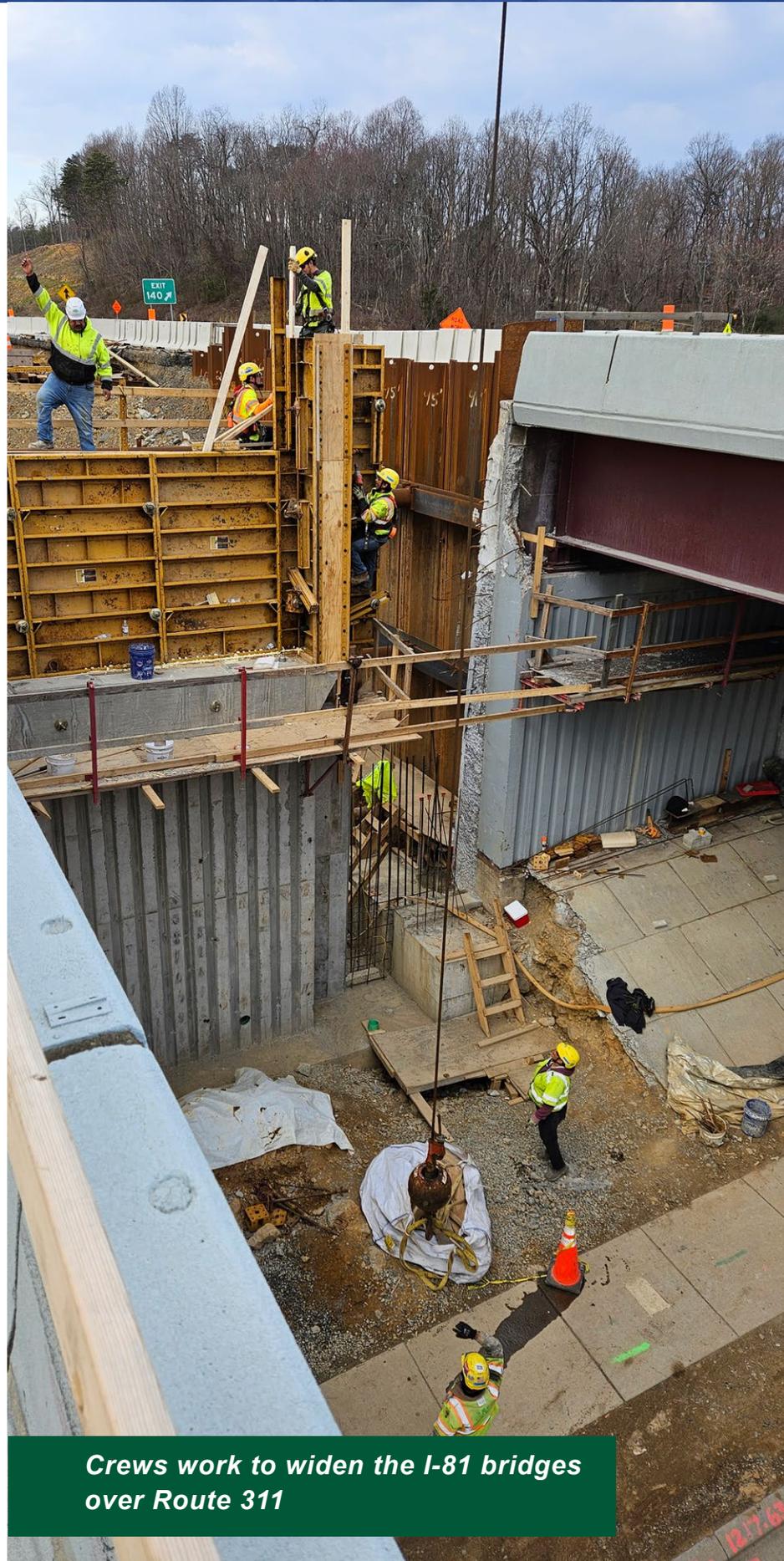
#### Exit 89 to Exit 168

Design-build contractor Archer Western LLC is steadily progressing through a four-year project to widen I-81 in the Salem area. The \$179 million project adds a third lane in each direction between exit 137 (Route 112/Wildwood Road) and exit 141 (Route 419/Electric Road).

Over the past few months, crews have been working on the construction of new I-81 bridges over Route 112, Route 635 (Goodwin Avenue) and Route 619 (Wildwood Road). They have also started widening the bridges over Route 311 (Thompson Memorial Drive), constructing sound barriers near exit 137, and have installed several thousand feet of barrier to protect the work zone.

I-81 traffic has already started using some new roadway and bridge structures, and additional areas are expected to open up during spring and summer 2024. Paving operations are also scheduled to take place during this time period. Motorists should be alert for nighttime and overnight lane closures, travel-lane shifts and 24/7 shoulder closures. The Salem-area widening project is expected to be complete in early 2026.

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**Crews work to widen the I-81 bridges over Route 311**

## Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

### Staunton District

#### Exit 175 to Exit 323

The I-81 southbound auxiliary lane project in Augusta County has reached its first milestone: removal of the Route 635 (Barterbrook Road) bridge over the interstate. A new bridge with more space underneath will allow construction of the auxiliary lane between exit 221 (I-64 junction) and exit 220 (Route 262 South/Woodrow Wilson Parkway).

Fairfield-Echols LLC was awarded a \$7.7 million contract to replace the bridge and build the auxiliary lane, which will enhance safety and reduce congestion where I-64 and I-81 merge just south of Staunton. The contractor has begun work to construct the new Route 635 bridge, and to extend a culvert underneath southbound I-81. On both directions of I-81, a work-zone speed limit of 60 miles per hour will remain in place of the duration of the project. Completion is scheduled for spring 2025.

Just north of the auxiliary lane project, design-build contractor Kokosing Construction is in the early stages of a \$101 million widening. This project includes a third northbound and southbound lane in the Staunton area, between exit 221 and exit 225 (Route 262 North/Woodrow Wilson Parkway). Crews will widen and rehabilitate five bridges along that stretch of the interstate.

During the late winter and early spring, crews cleared brush and trees from the right of way and completed shoulder-strengthening work. This will allow interstate traffic to shift away from the median, where the widening will take place. I-81 motorists should be alert for travel-lane shifts, 24/7 shoulder closures and overnight lane closures as needed.



*Construction of a concrete form for the new Route 635 bridge over I-81*



## 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](mailto: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.

### CONNECT WITH US

For access to I-81 VDOT district Twitter feeds, regional 511 traffic feeds, overall district news and district traffic alerts, visit [improve81.org](http://improve81.org) and click on "Contact Us".

## Contacts

### Communications Contacts

#### I-81 CIP Communications Specialist

Kenneth Slack | 540-414-5670  
ken.slack@vdot.virginia.gov

#### Salem District

Jason Bond | 540-387-5493  
jason.bond@vdot.virginia.gov

#### Bristol District

Michelle Earl | 276-696-3283  
michelle.earl@vdot.virginia.gov

#### Staunton District

Sandy Myers | 540-332-9201  
sandy.myers@vdot.virginia.gov

### Program Team

#### Program Delivery Director

Dave Covington | 540-487-6943  
dave.covington@vdot.virginia.gov

#### Program Website

[www.improve81.org](http://www.improve81.org)