

IMPROVE 81

Spring 2025

81 INSIDER

A Fresh Look at the Corridor

How have traffic conditions changed?

Has development created a need for new projects?

Have new “hot spots” emerged?

These are some of the questions that VDOT and its consulting team hope to answer with a new round of Interstate 81 study and surveys.

The original I-81 Corridor Improvement Program resulted from a 2018 study that included traffic analysis and several public meetings. The CIP, currently valued at more than \$3 billion, includes 65 focused construction projects and hundreds of individual traffic-operations enhancements.

The 2025 study aims to identify the next round of improvements to be considered for future funding.

The study began in January with an in-depth analysis of the entire 325-mile corridor in Virginia. The study team is focusing on segments that have the highest rate and severity of crashes, or the most significant traffic delays. The study excludes portions of the interstate where widenings or truck-climbing lanes were recently completed or are in development.

The first stage of the study will identify possible issues along the corridor by combining traffic data with virtual public engagement in spring 2025. The study team will present potential

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I-81 in Roanoke County

A New Look at the Corridor (continued)

solutions during a second round of public outreach in the summer. This will take place during four in-person meetings spaced throughout the corridor.

The final round of corridor-wide public engagement is scheduled for fall. They will help the study team refine their recommendations, which will be presented in late 2025 to the I-81 Advisory Committee and the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

VDOT will share details and schedules of public-input opportunities through news releases and social-media outreach. Engagement from motorists, residents, businesses and other stakeholders is vital for developing a new corridor plan that effectively addresses I-81's current and future needs.





The People Behind the Projects: Tanner Keen, P.E., Area Construction Engineer for I-81 CIP

Meet some of the VDOT team members who offer expertise, dedication and innovative thinking to the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP). Our Spring 2025 profile is Tanner Keen, P.E., who serves as Area Construction Engineer for Interstate 81 CIP projects within VDOT's Bristol District.

Tell us a bit about your background.

I have been with VDOT for almost 9 years, working in the Salem District as a Construction Manager prior to joining the Bristol team. Before serving as a Construction Manager, I was an engineer trainee, intern and scholar for VDOT. My wife and I live in Christiansburg and enjoy spending time with our son, being outdoors and finding the best places to eat.

What I-81 CIP projects are you involved in?

Currently, I am involved in five I-81 CIP projects of which four are in active construction:

- Extending the deceleration lane for I-77 northbound exit 41 and improving the exit 41 on-ramp for I-77 within the I-81 southbound loop beginning at exit 72 in Wythe County.
- Adding an auxiliary lane on I-81 southbound from exit 73 to exit 72, which is bundled with the project mentioned above.
- Extending the I-81 southbound deceleration lane for exit 81 in Wythe County.
- Replacing the north and southbound bridges on I-81 over I-77 at mile marker 72.8 and at Peppers Ferry Road at mile marker 72.3 in Wythe County.

- A project being developed to extend the northbound deceleration lane for exit 45 in Smyth County at Marion. It will include replacing the I-81 northbound bridge over Matson Drive at mile marker 45.5.

How will these projects benefit drivers on the interstate?

Increased capacity and safety. I have lived in the New River Valley my entire life and I-81 traffic is an ever-increasing sore spot with motorists due to the crashes and congestion that occurs. Improvements along the corridor will save lives and improve the quality of life for those traveling on I-81.

How is working on the I-81 CIP different from other projects?

Communication, coordination and a strategic plan. There are far more contributors involved with the I-81 CIP projects compared to other non-interstate projects. This requires constant communication and coordination to ensure all VDOT objectives are achieved, not just those associated with the project. Equally important is the development and execution of a well-thought-out plan.

When a new traffic shift or pattern is to be employed, we meet with the contractor and project staff far in advance to have detail-oriented conversations. Everything from the

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People Behind the Projects (continued)

number of workers, equipment, materials, temperatures and contingencies are discussed to work towards ensuring a solid plan. We strive to minimize risk by walking through the plan so everyone is on board and understands what is expected.

What has been the biggest challenge of your involvement with the I-81 CIP?

Coordinating work for projects within the I-81 CIP and other projects that affect the interstate. A bridge-painting contractor and paving contractor were recently working inside – or very close to – three I-81 CIP projects that are within sight of each other. Summer is peak construction season and everyone is working to be as productive as possible, especially during temperature-dependent operations such as asphalt placement or bridge painting.

Reviewing schedules and maintaining open lines of communication are the keys to keeping all contractors productively working. It can be a challenge, but our contracting partners have been good at working with VDOT and among themselves so everyone can complete their objectives. In a two-month span, four contractors were able to complete work on five projects and not

impact each other due to proper planning and communication.

What are some of the items you consider when working on CIP projects in your district?

Traffic restrictions for allowable work hours, time-of-year restrictions to protect threatened and endangered species, and paving restrictions for winter months must all be taken into consideration. Additionally, the complexity and coordination that occurs with these projects require the right people to be in the right positions from the beginning of design through construction.

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

Working with project staff and contractors by far has been the most enjoyable for me. While I am responsible for the delivery of these projects, I am surrounded by good teammates who are doing their part to carry the load. Design and support staff have been very helpful in working through issues that arise to keep projects moving. The construction managers and inspection staff take proactive steps to identify problems in advance, collect information and provide solutions. Our contractor partners come to the table with solutions for keeping projects on time and on budget.

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I-81 southbound widening near Bristol

People Behind the Projects (continued)

What's the most rewarding part of working on the I-81 CIP?

The challenge of learning something new by having projects on the interstate. Before coming to Bristol District, I had not had any project experience on the interstate. Immediately upon starting my current role, about half of my projects were on the interstate. This has been a stretch exercise that I am still learning, but one that I believe has fostered my career growth and how I approach handling situations.

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

A reduction of crashes and delays from traffic backups and the opportunity to be involved in these projects.





Construction work along I-81 in Wytheville

What's Next?



Here's a quick rundown of I-81 CIP projects scheduled for construction soon.

SPRING 2025

Construction advertisement for three interchange ramp improvements:



-  Northbound acceleration lane extension at exit 188 (Lexington/Buena Vista) in Rockbridge County.
-  Northbound acceleration lane extensions at exit 94 (Pulaski) in Pulaski County and exit 105 (Radford) in Montgomery County. VDOT plans to bundle these projects under a single construction contract.

SUMMER 2025

-  Shoulder-strengthening work begins for I-81 widening between exit 143 (I-581) in Roanoke County and exit 150 (Troutville) in Botetourt County. Widening work is scheduled to begin in 2026.
-  Construction advertisement for northbound acceleration lane extension at exit 162 (Buchanan) in Botetourt County.

FALL 2025

Construction advertisement for a widening project and interchange ramp improvements:

-  Northbound and southbound widening between exits 243 and 247 in the Harrisonburg area.
-  Northbound deceleration lane extension at exit 45 (Marion) in Smyth County.

Improve81 Construction Updates

Bristol District

Exit 1 to Exit 86

The Wytheville area is a flurry of activity with four I-81 CIP projects under construction around the interchange of Interstate 81 and I-77 north.

Branch Civil has a \$53.6 million contract to build an auxiliary lane on I-81 southbound between exit 73 (Route 11) and exit 72 (I-77 junction), as well as reconfigure the nearby I-77 exit 41 interchange at Peppers Ferry Road. Both projects are scheduled for completion in late 2027.

After a wet and snowy winter, exit 41 earthwork resumed in early spring. This includes some blasting operations to remove rock and accommodate a new interstate off-ramp. The nearby auxiliary lane project included bridge work during the winter months followed by repositioning of concrete barrier walls to allow for paving operations.

Three new bridges highlight a \$54 million design-build contract awarded to Orders Construction Company. The projects include a new auxiliary lane between I-77 southbound and I-81 southbound, and extensions to two of the merge lanes between the interstates. To accommodate the improvements, contractors are replacing both I-81 bridges over Peppers Ferry Road and the northbound bridge over the ramp to northbound I-77.

Blasting and other excavation work took place during the 2024/25 winter months and will continue in spring 2025, along with early stages of bridge construction. Final completion of the design-build projects is scheduled for early 2027.

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Excavation in the median along I-81 northbound near exit 72



Median and bridge work where I-81 crosses over Peppers Ferry Road

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Just north of Wytheville at exit 81, W-L Construction & Paving is extending the deceleration lane for drivers going from southbound I-81 to southbound I-77. By late spring 2025, the contractor plans to finish grading in the median and installing of a bridge-pier protection system. This will allow a slight realignment of the travel lanes and the start of construction on the right shoulder. The \$3.4 million project is expected to finish in late 2025.

Near the city of Bristol, W-L Construction is adding a third lane to southbound I-81 between exit 10 and exit 7. The \$30.7 million contract also includes widening of the southbound bridge over Old Dominion Road, and extending the three-lane portion of northbound I-81 by about one mile.

During the early months of 2025, the contractor has been laying base stone for the new travel lanes, installing sound-barrier wall along a portion of northbound I-81, and pouring the concrete deck for the new bridge. Full project completion is expected in November 2025.



Exit 81 interchange improvement work



Southbound I-81 bridge widening at Old Dominion Road



I-81 truck-climbing lanes ready for final paving

Two new truck-climbing lanes are also scheduled for completion in fall 2025. Both are located between mile markers 32 and 34 near the Smyth-Washington county line. W-L has a \$17.2 million contract for the two projects – one northbound, one southbound. This spring the contractor plans to move to the final phases of work which include paving, shoulder construction and guardrail installation.

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Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Salem District

Exit 89 to Exit 168

The widening of I-81 northbound and southbound near Salem is more than 75% complete. Archer Western Construction LLC has a \$179 million design-build contract for the project, which extends from exit 137 to exit 141 and connects to a previously widened portion of the interstate.

Bridge replacements at Route 112, Goodwin Avenue and Academy Street are in their final stages, and contractors continue widening work on the bridges over Route 311. Stormwater drainage work is 90% complete, and sound-barrier construction is more than halfway finished. Beginning this spring, contractors are paving the newly widened travel lanes. Project completion is scheduled for early 2026

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Second phase of bridge construction over Goodwin Avenue



Widening and sound-barrier construction near mile marker 139

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Staunton District

Exit 175 to Exit 323

Design-build contractor Kokosing Construction Company Inc. is widening I-81 northbound and southbound between exits 221 and 225 in the Staunton area. Crews are currently working to widen five bridges – northbound and southbound over Lewis Creek and the southbound bridges over Route 250, Augusta Woods Drive and the ramp to eastbound I-64.

Most of the median grading and stormwater-pipe installation is complete. Spring and summer 2025 will see continued bridge and pavement work in the median. Final completion of the \$101 million project is expected in summer 2027.



New piers will support wider bridges along I-81 near Staunton



Construction of new Barterbrook Road bridge over I-81

Just south of the Staunton-area widening, Fairfield-Echols has entered the final stages of construction for an I-81 southbound auxiliary lane. A major component of the \$7.7 million project is replacement of the Barterbrook Road overpass bridge. During spring and summer 2025, crews are pouring the concrete bridge deck and placing asphalt for the auxiliary lane. Final project completion is scheduled for fall 2025, but the new bridge should open to traffic in the summer.

Also this spring, two major projects get under way in the Shenandoah Valley. Shirley Contracting Company is widening a roughly

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Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

four-mile section of southbound I-81 near Strasburg, just south of the I-66 junction. The \$58.6 million project includes one bridge replacement, one bridge widening, and about a mile of sound-barrier walls along the east side of the interstate near exit 296.

Near the Augusta-Rockingham County line, Branch Civil is constructing northbound and southbound truck-climbing lanes. The \$61.4 million project is about four miles long, and includes merge-lane extensions at exit 235 (Weyers Cave).

Right-shoulder strengthening is under way for both of these projects. This will be followed by installation of concrete barrier along the left shoulders, which will protect crews working in the median. The new truck-climbing lanes should be ready for traffic in late 2027, followed by the Strasburg-area widening in fall 2028.



Shoulder strengthening in Augusta County for I-81 truck-climbing lane project



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
 800-FOR ROAD (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 X feeds, regional 511 traffic feeds, overall district news and district traffic alerts, visit [Improve81.org](https://www.improve81.org) and click on "Contact Us".

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