

81 INSIDER



I-81 Advisory Committee reviews CIP study

Future Projects Added to I-81 Program

More than \$2 billion dollars' worth of new projects have been added to the I-81 Corridor Improvement Plan (CIP). The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) in January approved 22 future capital improvements as well as \$3 million in traffic-operations enhancements.

The new construction will be scheduled over a 10-year period beginning in 2035, as current CIP projects are completed and funding for the next round is expected to become available.

Details of the 22 future projects are at [Improve81.org](https://www.improve81.org). Highlights include:

- Eight new widening projects in Frederick, Shenandoah, Rockingham, Augusta, Rockbridge and Washington counties

- Two new truck-climbing lanes in the New River Valley
- New auxiliary lanes in the Bristol and Staunton areas
- Ten acceleration- and deceleration-lane extensions at interchanges throughout the I-81 corridor

The CTB action followed a yearlong study of the I-81 corridor that included three rounds of in-person and online public outreach. The study initially identified 41 potential improvements worth more than \$7 billion. The study team used a process similar to SMART SCALE in order to prioritize the projects that would address the greatest safety and congestion needs along the corridor.

Pardon Our Dust – We’re Making I-81 Better

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) held a Pardon Our Dust meeting in January for a project to provide additional capacity and improve safety between I-81 exit 143 in Roanoke County and exit 150 in Botetourt County. The project widens seven miles of the interstate from two lanes to three lanes in both directions. More than 100 people attended the meeting. Construction started in 2025 and is expected to be completed in 2031.

“This project is our biggest step to date, and will greatly enhance safety and reliability,” said Dave Covington, VDOT’s I-81 Program Delivery Director. “We ask for your patience as we deliver one of the largest and most complex projects of the entire program.”

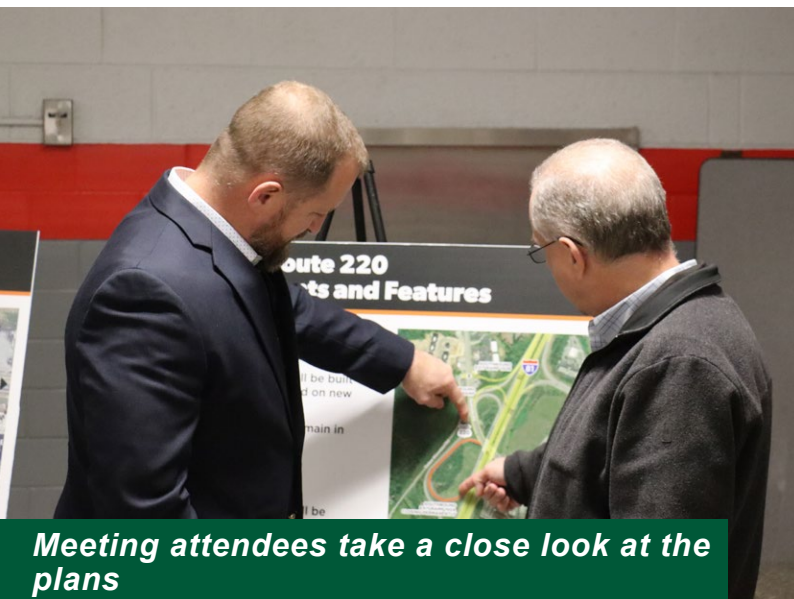
During most phases of construction, two lanes of I-81 in each direction will remain open during daytime hours (6 a.m. to 8 p.m.), with detours and lane closures mainly limited to overnight hours.

The \$479 million project includes improving vertical clearance under the Route 115 (Plantation Road) bridge and adding interchange lighting at exits 143, 146 and 150 to further enhance safety.

Two ramps at exit 150 will be realigned and the exit 150A southbound off ramp will be closed to make merging onto I-81 southbound easier. By early 2027, all southbound traffic exiting I-81 will use the newly aligned 150B off ramp, where drivers will come to a new signal at Tinker Mountain Road to take a left or right onto Route 220.

Other improvements include replacing existing concrete pavement with asphalt between exits 146 and 150, constructing about 1.6 miles of sound barriers along northbound I-81, and replacing the pairs of bridges including those over the following:

- Route 1836 (Belle Haven Road)
- Route 648 (Reservoir Road)
- Tinker Creek and Norfolk Southern Railway
- Route 220/Route 220 Alternate (Roanoke Road)



Meeting attendees take a close look at the plans



Plans for reconfiguring exit 150

Public Hearing Held on I-81 Southbound Widening in Rockbridge County

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) held a design public hearing in February for plans to widen Interstate 81 southbound in Rockbridge County.

The project will increase capacity from two lanes to three lanes for nearly 5.3 miles from about mile marker 205 (Raphine) to mile marker 200 (Fairfield). The planned improvements are intended to reduce crashes and lessen delays.

About 25 people attended the meeting, which offered an early look at design plans for this widening.

“This project is one of many locations along the I-81 corridor that will benefit from widening,” said Susan Hammond, VDOT’s Lexington Residency Administrator. “Improvements include the merge conditions at the southbound on-ramps at Raphine and Fairfield, shoulder widening to facilitate timely emergency clearance and increased capacity. These factors combined should improve the safety and mobility of motorists in this area.”

The widening will occur toward the median and will include replacement of the southbound I-81 bridge over Route 710 (Sterrett Road) at exit 200. The existing bridge over Route 710 is two lanes wide and will be widened to three lanes.

The \$116 million project is scheduled to be advertised for construction in the summer of 2028.



Residents view public hearing displays



Southbound I-81 bridge over Route 710



Southbound I-81 traffic near Raphine

\$219 Million Contract Awarded for I-81 Harrisonburg Widening

In January the Commonwealth Transportation Board awarded a \$218.9 million contract to Triton Construction Inc. to widen about six miles of I-81 at Harrisonburg. Construction is expected to start in spring 2026 and take about six years to complete.

The project adds a third lane northbound and southbound from about one mile south of exit 243 (Route 11/South Main Street) to about one mile north of exit 247 (Route 33/East Market Street). Eight bridges along the interstate main line will be replaced, as well as the Pleasant Valley Road overpass bridge.

I-81 widening will take place toward the median, within the existing VDOT right of way. A concrete barrier will separate northbound and southbound traffic. The project also constructs nearly four miles of noise barrier, upgrades stormwater management systems, and replaces the signalized intersection of

Early Road and Pleasant Valley Road with a roundabout.

The first several months of construction will include strengthening of right shoulders and installation of temporary concrete barrier walls to protect the work zone. These operations will take place during nighttime and overnight hours to minimize traffic impacts. VDOT plans extensive public outreach before the start of construction and at various stages of the project.

“This is a long-awaited project for I-81 drivers and for Harrisonburg,” said Joel DeNunzio, VDOT Staunton District Engineer. “We will engage with the community every step of the way so they know what’s happening and how it will affect them.”



I-81 crossing Blacks Run in Harrisonburg

Widening Projects Coming to Winchester

VDOT has started design work for significant improvements in the Winchester-Frederick County area. Plans now call for two separate widening projects on I-81 and closely related upgrades to a high-traffic interchange.

The original I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP) included widening four miles of the interstate between exit 313 (Route 50/17/522) and exit 317 (Route 11). Further analysis of the corridor led VDOT to extend the widening roughly one mile further to the north. This provided an opportunity to coordinate the widening with interchange improvements already planned for exit 317.

“A lot is happening in that location including realignment of the northbound off-ramp and construction of a diverging diamond interchange (DDI),” explains Scott Alexander, Assistant Location and Design Engineer for the VDOT Staunton District. “The study showed that we could avoid conflicts and make these projects more successful and efficient by doing a bit more on the interstate and bundling the improvements together.”

VDOT has divided the improvements into two separate design-build projects:

- “Winchester North” adds a third lane to I-81 in each direction between about mile marker 317 and 318.8. It will include the improvements at exit 317 and replacement of I-81 bridges over two rail lines and

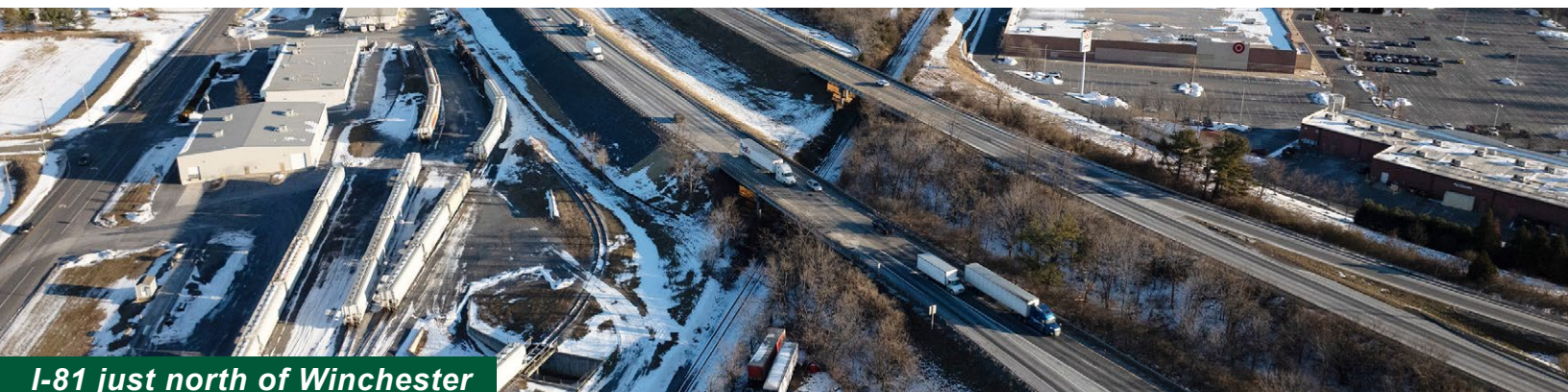
Route 11. This will allow VDOT to provide sufficient vertical clearance for large truck traffic on Route 11.

- “Winchester South” adds a third I-81 lane in each direction between about mile marker 312.2 and 317, and replaces the interstate bridges over Abrams Creek. This project will avoid conflicts with the exit 313 bridge replacement, which is scheduled to start in 2026.

“There are distinct advantages in taking a design-build approach to all of this work,” explains Dave Covington, I-81 Program Delivery Director. “The builder gets involved sooner and can offer some insight during the engineering phase. And quite often, we can start the early stages of construction while design work is finishing up.”

VDOT will divide the Winchester-area improvements into two separate contracts in order to combine and accelerate the northern projects. The exit 317 reconstruction and northern widening will tentatively begin in late 2027 at a cost of about \$240 million. The southern portion of I-81 widening, estimated at \$290 million, would start in 2028 or 2029.

Public meetings will precede each project in order for VDOT to gather input that will help inform the final design of each improvement. The first meeting – focused on the northern projects – is scheduled for summer 2026.



I-81 just north of Winchester

I-81 Winchester-Area Widening Projects Mile Marker 312.2 - 318.8, Frederick County



N “Winchester North” Design-Build Bundle

Tentative Construction Start Date: 2027

Project Estimate: \$240 million

Funded by Interstate 81 Corridor Improvement Program and SMART SCALE program

- Widens Interstate 81 to three lanes northbound and southbound between approximately mile marker 317 and 318.8
- Replaces bridges over CSX Railway, Route 11 (Martinsburg Pike) and Winchester & Western Railroad
- Constructs Diverging Diamond Interchange (DDI) and relocates northbound off-ramp at exit 317

S “Winchester South” Design-Build Project

Tentative Construction Start Date: 2028 or 2029

Project Estimate: \$290 million

Funded by Interstate 81 Corridor Improvement Program

- Widens Interstate 81 to three lanes northbound and southbound between approximately mile marker 312.2 and 317
- Replace bridges over Abrams Creek
- Coordinates with Route 50/17/522 (Millwood Pike) overpass bridge replacement at exit 313

Data as of January 2026. Dates and estimates subject to change.

Improve81 Construction Updates

Staunton District

(Counties of Frederick, Warren, Shenandoah, Rockingham, Augusta and Rockbridge)

In February 2026, steel beams were lowered into place for phase one of the new Cedar Creek bridge near Strasburg. This work marked a mini-milestone in the widening of southbound I-81 from about mile marker 300 to 295. Contractors are about a third of the way through the project, which is scheduled for final completion in fall 2027. Southbound traffic is expected to shift toward the median onto newly built sections of roadway and bridges by the end of this summer.

Construction of northbound and southbound truck-climbing lanes is progressing at Weyers Cave near the border of Augusta and Rockingham counties. As part of the four-mile-long project, crews are widening the bridges over Naked Creek. Crews are currently building bridge piers and abutments, and continuing grading and stormwater drainage work. Project completion is set for late 2027.

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Steel bridge beams in place over Cedar Creek near Strasburg

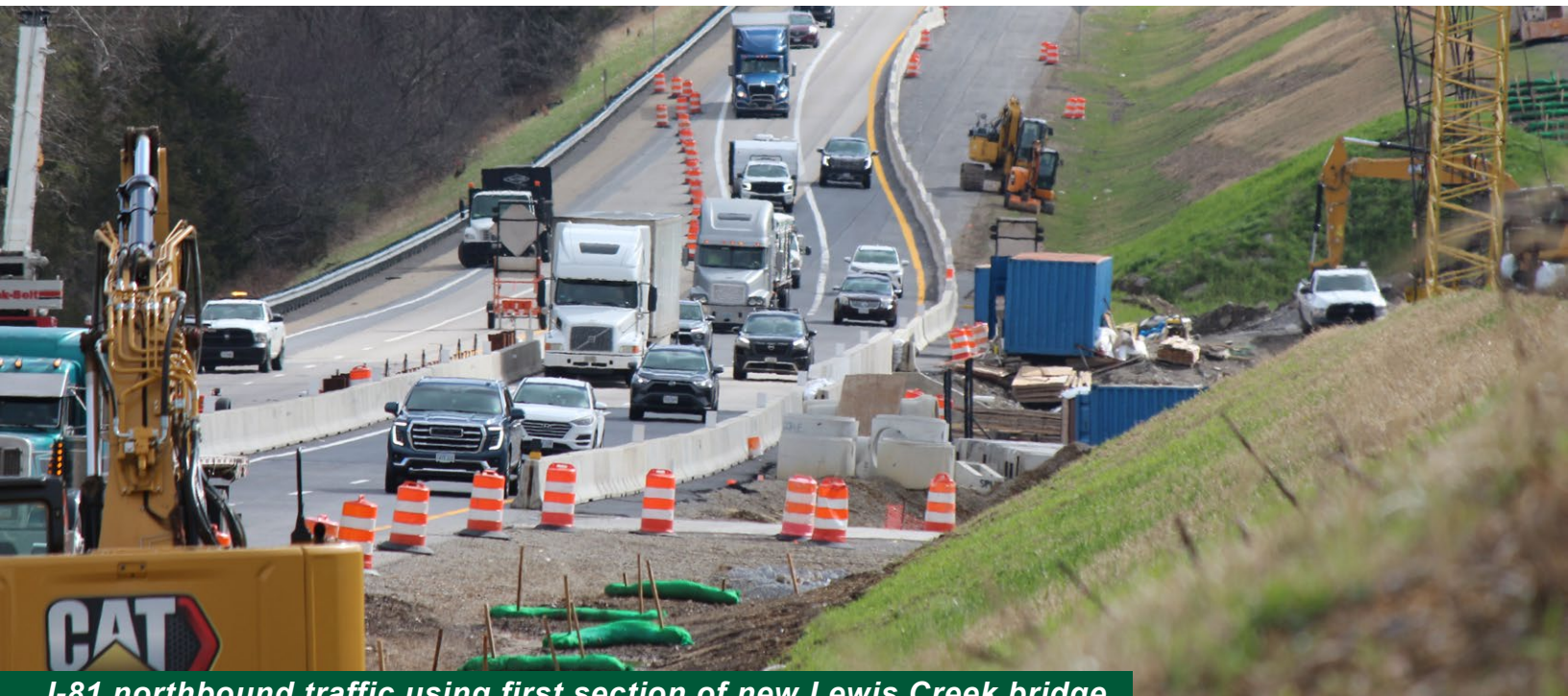


Replacement of Cedar Creek bridge on southbound I-81



Bridge work as part of truck-climbing lanes project

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)



I-81 northbound traffic using first section of new Lewis Creek bridge

Five bridge widenings highlight the northbound and southbound widening from exit 221 to exit 225 near Staunton. In March and April, both directions of I-81 traffic shifted to the inside (toward the median) for the northern portion of the project. This allows crews to begin the second phase of bridge widening at Lewis Creek. Bridge construction continues throughout the project, which is expected to finish in summer 2027. *continued on page 9*



Northbound and southbound bridge work over Lewis Creek



Widening I-81 southbound bridge over Route 250

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Salem District

(Counties of Botetourt, Roanoke, Montgomery and Pulaski)

Contractors continue strengthening shoulders and installing concrete barrier this spring along I-81 in Roanoke and Botetourt counties – the early stages of widening between exits 143 and 150. The project adds a third travel lane in both directions, replaces four pairs of bridges, and improves interchange connections at exit 150.

In the Salem area, crews are in the final stages of I-81 northbound and southbound widening between exits 137 and 141. Construction continues on the bridges over Route 311, as well as stormwater facilities and grading throughout the project. Final paving is scheduled for this spring and summer.

Midsummer completion is expected for acceleration-lane extensions at exit 94 southbound near Pulaski and exit 105 northbound at Radford. The first phase of work is complete at both locations, and the spring months will see extensive slope work along the shoulders. Meantime, contractors are targeting a late 2026 completion for the northbound acceleration-lane extension at exit 162 near Buchanan.

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Acceleration lane extension at exit 105



Acceleration lane extension at exit 94



Placement of concrete barrier for exit 143-150 work zone

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

A Bristol District

(Counties of Wythe, Smyth and Washington)

In early 2026 southbound I-81 traffic shifted onto the newly constructed portion of the bridge over Peppers Ferry Road in Wytheville. Northbound and southbound bridge construction continues at this location, as part of a design-build contract that also includes new I-81 bridges over I-77 and a new auxiliary lane between the two interstates. Completion is set for summer 2027.

A second bundle of projects in the Wytheville area includes a new southbound I-81 auxiliary lane between exits 73 and 72, and reconfiguration of the nearby I-77 exit 41 interchange. Crews continue earth-moving and stormwater drainage work for the auxiliary lane, while final paving operations for the new interchange ramp are scheduled for this spring.

Construction is under way for an extended northbound deceleration lane at I-81 exit 45 near the town of Marion. The project requires replacement of the northbound bridge over Matson Drive. When left shoulder strengthening is complete this spring, traffic will shift toward the median and bridge work will begin. This project is set for completion in late 2027.

In Washington County near the city of Bristol, crews are eyeing a late-spring completion for the southbound widening between exits 10 and 7. Final stages include southbound bridge work over Old Dominion Road and paving operations throughout the project.



Ramp reconfiguration at I-77 exit 41



Bridge construction over Peppers Ferry Road



Construction on I-81 near I-77 junction



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 to the appropriate I-81 CIP team member.

CONNECT WITH US

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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