

IMPROVE 81

Summer 2026

81 INSIDER



Quick incident clearance eases congestion and improves I-81 safety

Making Your “TRIP” Smoother

Memorial Day 2026 marked five years since VDOT expanded its Towing and Recovery Incentive Program (TRIP) to I-81. Since then, the program has played a major role in keeping traffic moving on the interstate.

Incidents such as crashes and vehicle fires are the chief cause of I-81 congestion. Idle traffic hurts Virginia’s economy and is a major safety risk, as drivers traveling at interstate speed approach slowed or stopped vehicles.

Under TRIP, VDOT partners with heavy-duty towing and recovery companies to standardize response to commercial vehicle incidents blocking a travel lane.

The program has about 20 locally based tow providers throughout the 325-mile corridor. Each one must meet requirements to ensure only well-trained operators with proper heavy-duty equipment and safety gear respond to these incidents. The TRIP partner receives financial

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incentive for each response and clearance that meets all performance requirements.

During the five years since the program was expanded to I-81, TRIP providers have:

- Responded to more than 2,000 incidents and have earned their incentive 97% of the time.
- A 34-minute average arrival time (when all needed equipment is on scene).
- A 77-minute average scene-clearance time, measured from the start of an incident to the time that all travel lanes reopen to traffic.
This is 40 minutes faster than the three-year average before TRIP was expanded to I-81.

“With the addition of TRIP, we can open blocked travel lanes more efficiently and much quicker,” says Brian Holt, Bristol District Traffic Operations Engineer. “Having a tow company on-call 24/7 that responds with the appropriately trained staff and the specialized equipment needed to clean up a tractor trailer crash saves several miles of queue and hours of congestion.”



TRIP providers respond to incidents with specialized equipment and training

81 TRIP is among numerous traffic-operations upgrades that are funded by the I-81 CIP. Other completed operational improvements include dynamic message signs, live traffic cameras, additional Safety Service Patrol coverage, and parallel route enhancements.

Progress Along the I-81 Corridor: Southbound Widening in Bristol Now Complete

Travelers along Interstate 81 in Bristol have something to celebrate. The newly widened three lane section of southbound I-81 between exits 10 and 7 is officially open, marking a major milestone in ongoing efforts to improve safety, reduce congestion, and support economic growth along this vital corridor in Southwest Virginia. This project was part of the larger I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP).

This \$38 million widening project, constructed by WL Construction & Paving Inc. of Chilhowie, began in January 2024 with extensive earthmoving and stormwater management work.

Throughout the life of the project, crews also worked to widen the southbound bridge over Old Dominion Road. That work was done in stages so traffic could continue flowing on both roadways during construction. The contract also included a concrete barrier to separate northbound and southbound traffic, and noise barriers along portions of I-81.

Drivers will also notice progress northbound. In addition to the southbound improvements, one mile of northbound I-81 between Exit 7 and the

Old Dominion Road bridge has been widened to three lanes, offering better flow and improved reliability for motorists.

“Completing the widening of southbound I-81 in Bristol marks another important step in delivering safer, more reliable travel for the residents, businesses, and visitors who depend on this corridor every day. This project reflects our continued commitment to investing in infrastructure that strengthens Southwest Virginia’s economy. We’re grateful for the hard work of our crews, our partners, and the continued support of the community,” said Bristol District Engineer Tabitha Crowder, P.E.

The bulk of construction was completed by the end of 2025, with final paving operations in spring 2026. The expanded lanes are already helping traffic move more smoothly through one of the region’s busiest stretches of interstate.

Related work continues on a project to replace the I-81 northbound bridge over Old Dominion Road. Also being built by WL Construction & Paving, Inc., this bridge is funded through VDOT’s State of Good Repair program. Completion is anticipated in May 2027.



Bristol project includes an additional travel lane and noise-barrier walls



Southbound widening connects with existing three-lane section



Construction on the Ironto northern segment is tentatively scheduled for spring 2027

Contract Awarded for I-81 Widening in Roanoke County and Salem

The Commonwealth Transportation Board has awarded a \$237.75 million contract to widen both directions of I-81 in Roanoke County and Salem between mile marker 133.8 and exit 137. The contract was awarded to Triton Construction Inc., who will complete design work before moving to construction, tentatively set to begin in spring 2027.

The 3.2-mile widening is part of a larger improvement project along nine miles of I-81 northbound and southbound near Ironto, which includes three separate segments:

- Segment N: Mile marker 133.8 to exit 137 (contract awarded)
- Segment M: Mile markers 131 to 133.8 with construction expected to start in 2028
- Segment S: Exit 128 to mile marker 131 with construction expected to start in late 2027 or early 2028

This project increases capacity and improves safety by widening nine miles of I-81 from two lanes to three lanes between exit 128 in Montgomery County and exit 137 in Roanoke County/Salem. The project also replaces bridges, improves interchange ramps, installs concrete barriers and constructs noise walls in some locations. The entire project is anticipated to be completed by fall 2035.

“We are excited to begin the final design and construction of this critical portion of Interstate 81 to improve safety and reliability for motorists,” said Dave Covington, I-81 program delivery director for VDOT.

“We look forward to construction starting on the first of three segments on this section of I-81,” said Ken King, district engineer for VDOT’s Salem District. “Widening this section is a major step forward for the Roanoke-Blacksburg region. This investment will make travel safer and help keep people and goods moving reliably for years to come.”

Winchester Community Gets a Close Look at Major Improvements

More than \$250 million worth of upgrades are coming to Interstate 81, the exit 317 interchange and several nearby roadways in Frederick County just north of Winchester. Close to 60 drivers, business owners and other stakeholders attended a public hearing in late June to learn the details and ask questions.

The plans include:

- Adding a third lane to northbound and southbound I-81 between about mile marker 317 and 319.
- Reconstructing exit 317 as a diverging diamond interchange and realigning the northbound off-ramp to the current location of Route 661 (Redbud Road).
- Building a new park-and-ride lot between Route 661 (Welltown Road) and Crown Lane. Parts of Welltown and Crown would be converted to one-way roads near their intersections with Route 11 (Martinsburg Pike).

The “Winchester North” projects are funded by the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program and Virginia’s SMART SCALE program. VDOT plans to seek design-build bids in late 2026. Construction could start about a year later.

Additional information about the projects, including public hearing display boards, can be found on the

VDOT website at <https://www.vdot.virginia.gov/I81WinchesterNorthProjects>.

Plans to widen I-81 from about mile marker 312 to 317 are in their early stages. This widening will be coordinated with the Winchester North bundle of projects, as well as the bridge replacement at I-81 exit 313.





Influencing Driver Behavior in I-81 Work Zones

You may be seeing more messages up and down the I-81 corridor about tailgating, distracted driving, impatient driving, speeding and abrupt lane changes. That's because in 2025, there was an increase in traffic crashes along the I-81 corridor. Crash data revealed consistent patterns of risky driver behavior in combination with the physical restrictions of work zones across the Staunton, Salem and Bristol Districts.

Now, VDOT is stepping up safety messaging to address these dangerous trends and encourage safer driving behaviors.

Data for I-81 work zones in the Staunton District revealed 61% are rear-end crashes related to stopping or slowing vehicles with most citations written for following too closely. Additional observed driver behaviors included speeding and abrupt lane changes.

You will see rotating reminders on digital message boards before you encounter a work zone on I-81 and within the work zone. Examples include: "DRIVE WITH FOCUS," "SPEEDING FINES HIGHER" and "INCREASE FOLLOW DISTANCE." All three districts will also be sharing similar messages on social media.

As we continue work across the I-81 corridor, safety remains our shared responsibility. Every driver plays a role in preventing crashes by slowing down, staying alert, and giving others space to move through work zones safely. When we all commit to safer habits behind the wheel, we protect not only ourselves but also our families, our neighbors, and the crews working to improve this vital corridor. Together, we can make I-81 a safer place for everyone.



Improve 81 Construction Updates



I-81 traffic moving through Wytheville-area work zone

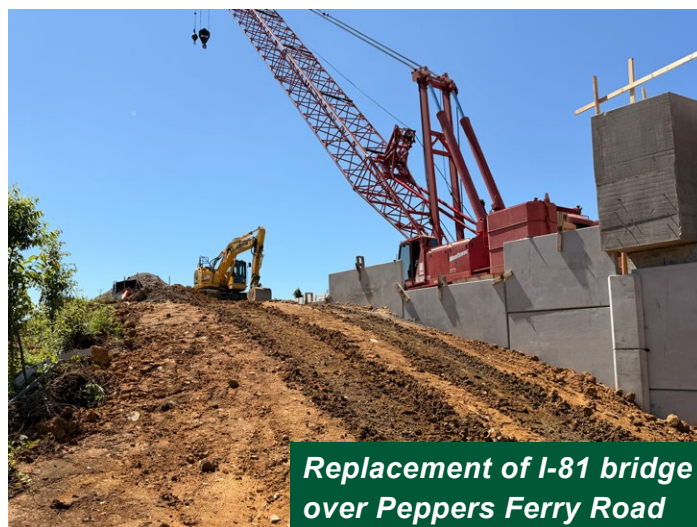
Bristol District

(Counties of Wythe, Smyth and Washington)

Multiple work zones are bringing four improvement projects around the junction of I-81 and I-77 near Wytheville.

Design-build contractor Orders Construction is extending acceleration and deceleration lanes, building a new auxiliary lane, and replacing three bridges to accommodate the added lanes. Completion of these improvements is scheduled for summer 2027. Ramp work starts this summer at the interchange of I-77 southbound to I-81 southbound. Contractors have also moved to phase two of the bridge replacements over Peppers Ferry Road. Structural beams are in place, and bridge-deck construction is under way.

Branch Civil has a three-project contract that includes two interstate improvements – the reconstruction of the I-77 northbound interchange



Replacement of I-81 bridge over Peppers Ferry Road

at exit 41, and a new auxiliary lane on I-81 southbound linking exits 73 and 72. Crews started paving work this spring at exit 41. They have also started building the subgrade that will serve as the foundation for pavement on the new auxiliary lane. The Branch projects should be finished this fall.

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In Smyth County, near the town of Marion, contractors are replacing the I-81 northbound bridge over Matson Drive to accommodate a deceleration-lane extension at exit 45. Left shoulder strengthening has shifted northbound traffic toward the median, allowing the early stages of bridge demolition to begin. Bridge work and excavation will continue for the rest of this year, with final project completion set for late 2027.



Final paving on the reconstructed I-77 exit 41 interchange



Early stages of I-81 bridge replacement over Matson Drive

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New travel lanes near Salem will be ready for traffic late this summer



Salem District

(Counties of Botetourt, Roanoke, Montgomery and Pulaski)

One major widening project in the Roanoke-Salem area is nearing completion, while another is in its early stages.

By the end of this summer, design-build contractor Archer Western is scheduled to finish widening I-81 in both directions between exits 137 and 141 near Salem. Between now and then, crews will finish widening the bridges over Route 311, install two final stormwater basins, and spread the top layer of asphalt throughout the project limits.

As work continues on the exit 143 to exit 150 project in Roanoke and Botetourt counties, drivers will begin seeing significant traffic shifts and roadway changes around the area of southbound exits 150A and 150B.

Within the next few months, traffic will be shifted onto newly constructed temporary lanes while crews build new interstate lanes, ramps, and bridges. Exit 150A will eventually close as traffic transitions to a redesigned exit 150B

Roanoke-Botetourt widening requires extensive earthmoving and stormwater drainage work



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with new ramp alignments, traffic signals, and roadway connections.

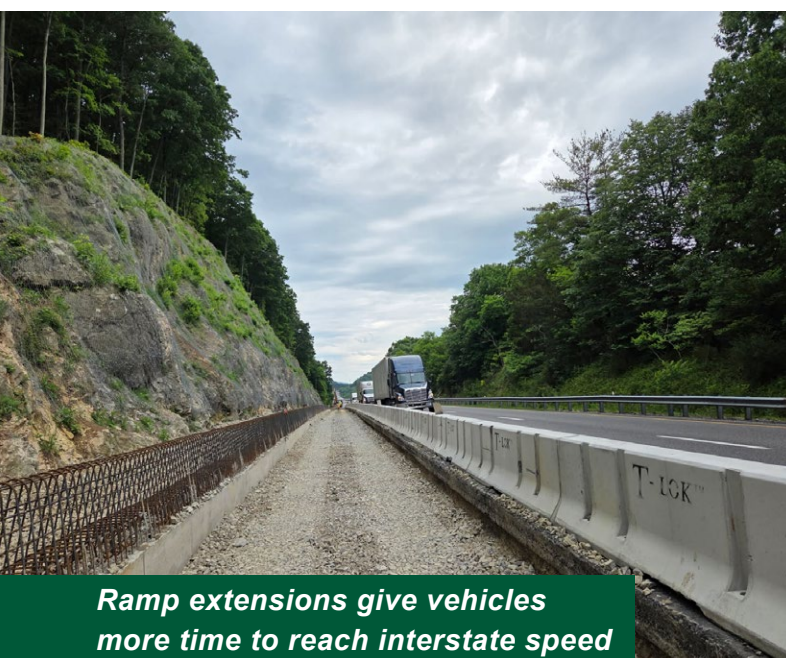
Drivers should expect changing traffic patterns, narrowed lanes, barrier walls, and periodic shoulder closures.

Improvements to three I-81 acceleration lanes are making steady progress. Caton Construction has a \$6.8 million contract to build two of them – at exit 94 southbound (Pulaski) and exit 105 northbound (Radford). Both are scheduled for completion later this year. At exit 105, contractors are working on rock-slope barriers, drainage structures and final paving. Remaining work at exit 94 includes roadway widening, minor slope grading, barrier removal and top-surface paving.

The third interchange improvement is at exit 162 near Buchanan, where Crossroads Bridge Inc. is scheduled to finish in late 2026. The final months of construction will include excavation, drainage work and installation of retaining walls.



The I-81 exit 150 interchange at Route 220 will see extensive changes



Ramp extensions give vehicles more time to reach interstate speed



Exit 105 project includes rock-slope barrier

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Temporary I-81 South closure allowed installation of new overhead signs



Two of the five I-81 bridges being widened near Staunton



Median excavation for truck-climbing lanes near Weyers Cave



Staunton District

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

Four separate construction projects are bringing additional lanes to I-81 in the Shenandoah Valley.

A four-mile widening is more than 60% complete in the Staunton area. A weekend closure of I-81 southbound in May allowed contractors to install new overhead sign structures and perform paving operations that help ensure smooth lane changes and proper stormwater drainage.

During a similar closure in June, crews transitioned southbound traffic onto newly built portions of I-81 bridges over Route 250 and Augusta Woods Drive. A total of five bridges are being widened as part of the \$101 million project. Design-build contractor Kokosing Inc. is scheduled to finish in mid-2027, but all three northbound lanes should open to traffic in late fall 2026.

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Near the Augusta-Rockingham county line, Branch Civil is approaching the halfway point of a \$61 million truck-climbing lanes project. Work during spring 2026 included median excavation, some base-layer paving, and placement of steel girders for wider bridges at Naked Creek. The new northbound and southbound travel lanes should be complete in late 2027, and will help commercial truck drivers navigate steep grades in the Weyers Cave area.

A third lane is under construction along I-81 southbound near Strasburg. The four-mile, \$59 million project includes a bridge widening over the CSX railway and a new bridge over Cedar Creek. Bridge work during spring and summer 2026 includes steel beams at the railway crossing, and pouring of the concrete driving surface over the river. Traffic is tentatively scheduled to shift toward the median in August 2026, allowing contractors to proceed with the second half of the project. Final completion is set for fall 2028.

Spring 2026 marked the start of construction on a nearly seven-mile widening of I-81 northbound and southbound at Harrisonburg. Triton Construction Inc. was awarded a \$219 million contract for the project, which includes nine new bridges. Early phases of work include strengthening and widening of the right shoulders. Summer 2026 will see the start of the first bridge replacement – the Pleasant Valley Road overpass. The Harrisonburg widening is scheduled for completion in 2032.



Shoulder work in Harrisonburg takes place overnight to minimize traffic impacts



New piers and abutments allow I-81 bridge widening over CSX railway



I-81 shoulder strengthening starts with nearly three feet of excavation



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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