

IMPROVE 81

Winter 2026

81 INSIDER



Viewing public meeting boards

A Closer Look at the Biggest Project

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) held a design public hearing in November for plans to provide additional capacity and improve safety. The project widens nine miles of Interstate 81 from two lanes to three lanes in both directions between exit 128 in Montgomery County and exit 137 in Roanoke County/Salem.

More than 125 people attended the meeting, which offered an early look at design plans for the largest project in the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program (CIP). Construction is expected to begin in spring 2027 and be completed by fall 2035.

The planned improvements are intended to reduce crashes, lessen delays and enhance emergency response times.

This portion of I-81 experiences frequent congestion and major delays related to significant crashes and incidents with 806 crashes occurring between 2019 and 2023. Traffic volumes range between 51,000 and 56,000 vehicles per day with 28% heavy trucks.

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A Closer Look at the Biggest Project (continued)



Project Highlights:

Nine Miles of Improvements

Seven Pairs of Bridges

Two Interchanges Improved

Three Project Segments



Viewing public meeting maps

The \$760 million - \$1 billion project along nine miles of I-81 near Ironto includes three separate segments:

- Mile marker 133.8 to exit 137
- Mile markers 131 to 133.8
- Exit 128 to mile marker 131

Ramps will be improved at exit 128 (Ironto), at exit 132 (Dixie Caverns) and at the Ironto Safety Rest Area. The project will also construct approximately five miles of sound walls, concrete barrier wall in narrow median

sections, and replace seven pairs of bridges including those over the following:

- North Fork of the Roanoke River and the railroad tracks
- Route 647 (Dow Hollow Road)
- Route 927 (Glenvar Heights Boulevard)
- Route 777 (Fort Lewis Church Road)
- Route 642 (Alleghany Drive)
- Route 640 (Butt Hollow Road)
- Route 641 (Texas Hollow Road)



Portion of I-81 near Dixie Caverns

Driving Forward on I-81 Solutions

In fall 2025, the I-81 Corridor Improvement Plan study team refined and prioritized solutions to continue improving safety and reducing congestion on I-81.

The team identified 40 potential projects estimated to cost more than \$7 billion. Based on available funding, the study team ranked projects focusing on impact and cost. The resulting “short list” included 20 additional I-81 improvement projects totaling just over \$2 billion.

They shared those recommendations during in-person public meetings held in late October in Abingdon, Salem, Weyers Cave and Winchester. An accompanying online survey drew more than 350 responses from the public.

Final recommendations were presented in December to the I-81 Advisory Committee and the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB). The CTB is scheduled to vote on the final list of new I-81 CIP projects in January 2026.

Among the projects under consideration (pending CTB approval):



Washington County / City of Bristol: A northbound auxiliary lane between exit 3 and exit 5, and widening in both directions between mile marker 8 and exit 14.



Pulaski / Montgomery Counties: A southbound truck climbing lane from the New River Bridge to mile marker 103, and a northbound truck climbing lane from exit 105 to exit 109.



Augusta County: An additional southbound lane from exit 221 to exit 217.



Rockingham County: Widening both directions between mile marker 238 and mile marker 242.



Shenandoah / Warren Counties: Adding a third northbound lane from exit 298 to exit 300.



I-81 CIP public meeting - October 2025

What to Watch for in 2026

Winter



Smyth County

Start of construction on exit 45 northbound deceleration lane extension



Botetourt County - January 22

"Pardon Our Dust" public meeting for exit 143-150 construction



Rockbridge County - February 17

Public hearing for southbound exit 205-200 widening

Spring



Harrisonburg and Rockingham County

Start of construction for mile marker 242-248 widening



Washington County

Completion of southbound widening between exit 10 and exit 7

Summer



Roanoke

Design-build contract award for widening from mile marker 134 to exit 137



Salem and Roanoke County

Completion of widening between exit 137 and exit 141

Fall



Frederick County

Advertise Request for Design-Build Proposals for mile marker 317-319 widening



Augusta County

Northbound portion of Staunton-area widening opens to traffic

All dates are subject to change.

Improve81 Construction Updates

Bristol District

(Counties of Wythe, Smyth and Washington)

Multiple improvements funded by the I-81 CIP are under construction in the Wytheville area. As part of a \$53.6 million “bundled” contract, Branch Civil is building an I-81 auxiliary lane between exit 73 (Route 11) and exit 72 (I-77 junction). The contract also includes a major reconfiguration of the nearby I-77 exit 41 interchange with Peppers Ferry Road.

Stormwater ditching for the auxiliary lane is expected to be complete in spring 2026. Crews have finished the majority of earth-moving at exit 41 and plan to begin paving in the spring. Both projects are set for completion in 2027.

Design-build contractor Orders Construction is making steady progress on more improvements around the junction of I-81



Wytheville Design Build

and I-77. The \$53.9 million contract includes three bridge replacements, extensions to acceleration and deceleration lanes, and a new auxiliary lane between the interstates.

Contractors have finished phase one – the median side – of the new I-81 southbound bridge over Peppers Ferry Road. Southbound traffic is expected to shift onto to the new portion by spring 2026 so contractors can begin the second half of the project. Final completion is expected in early 2027.

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Wytheville Auxiliary Lane



I-77 at exit 41

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

In spring 2026 W-L Construction plans to finish a \$30.7 million widening of southbound I-81 between exit 10 and exit 7 near Bristol. Crews are in the final stages of sound-barrier construction and southbound I-81 bridge widening over Old Dominion Road. The project includes some improvements on the northbound side including a one-mile widening and installation of sound-barrier walls.

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Southbound bridge widening over Old Dominion Road



Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)



Exit 143 - 150 in Salem

Salem District

(Counties of Botetourt, Roanoke, Montgomery and Pulaski)

Nighttime and overnight work highlighted the first several months of construction on the I-81 widening in Roanoke and Botetourt counties. Design-build firm Branch Civil has a \$361 million contract for the project, which extends from exit 143 (I-581 junction) to exit 150 (Route 220). It includes northbound and southbound widening, replacement of four pairs of bridges, and a partial reconstruction of the exit 150 interchange.

Branch has been strengthening the right shoulders in preparation for a spring 2026 traffic shift, which will allow widening work to begin in the median. Contractors have started installing concrete barriers along the left shoulders to protect the work zone.

In late 2025, a second portion of the Salem-area widening project opened to traffic. Drivers began using the third southbound lane from about mile marker 138.5 to mile marker 137, the southern limits of the project. Final completion of the \$179 million widening is expected in mid-2026.



Salem-area widening



Bridge work at exit 140

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Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Design-build contractor Archer Western continues final-phase bridge work, slope grading and stormwater improvements. Sound barrier construction and sign installations finished in late 2025, and roadway lighting is 75% complete.

Three ramp extensions are under construction in the Salem District. Caton Construction Group has a \$6.8 million contract to extend the southbound acceleration lane at exit 94 in Pulaski County and the northbound acceleration lane at exit 105 near Radford. Crews have installed construction barriers and started excavation work. Both projects are scheduled for completion this summer. Crossroads Bridge Inc. was awarded a \$6 million contract to extend the northbound acceleration lane at exit 162 (Buchanan). Construction started in November and will finish in late 2026.

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Exit 162 in Buchanan



Exit 105 near Radford



Exit 94 in Pulaski

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)

Staunton District

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

Construction of a third southbound lane is well under way on I-81 from mile marker 300 to 295 near Strasburg. A \$58.6 million contract, awarded to Shirley Contracting Company, includes replacement of the Cedar Creek bridge and widening of the bridge over the CSX railway. Completion is expected in fall 2028.

During the first year of construction, crews focused on bridge demolition and construction, installation of stormwater structures, and the early phases of paving operations. Some controlled blasting has been needed to remove large areas of rock from the median.

Branch Civil Inc. has a \$61.4 million contract to build truck-climbing lanes in both directions of I-81 near Weyers Cave. The project extends from mile marker 234 in Augusta County to mile marker 238 in Rockingham County. Other improvements include three ramp extensions at the exit 235 (Route 256) interchange.

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Strasburg area widening



Cedar Creek bridge work



Weyers Cave truck climbing lanes

Improve81 Construction Updates (continued)



Bridge widening over Lewis Creek

Contractors are about one-third of the way through construction, which is scheduled for completion in late 2027. During 2025, they performed extensive grading and drainage work, and began widening the northbound and southbound bridges over Naked Creek. Early 2026 will see placement of base and intermediate-layer asphalt on part of the project.

About 10 miles to the south, Kokosing Inc. is more than halfway through the Staunton-area widening project. The design-build contract, valued at \$101 million, includes a third lane northbound and southbound between exit 221 (I-64 junction) and exit 225 (Route 262 north). Final completion is set for summer 2027, but the northbound widening is scheduled to open to traffic this fall.

In late 2025, contractors poured the concrete deck for the first of five bridge widenings. That work continues into spring 2026. During the same time period, crews plan to finish grading, install overhead signs, and shift northbound traffic toward the median through most of the project limits. This will allow the second phase of widening to commence along the right shoulder.



Traffic in Staunton-area work zone



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.



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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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