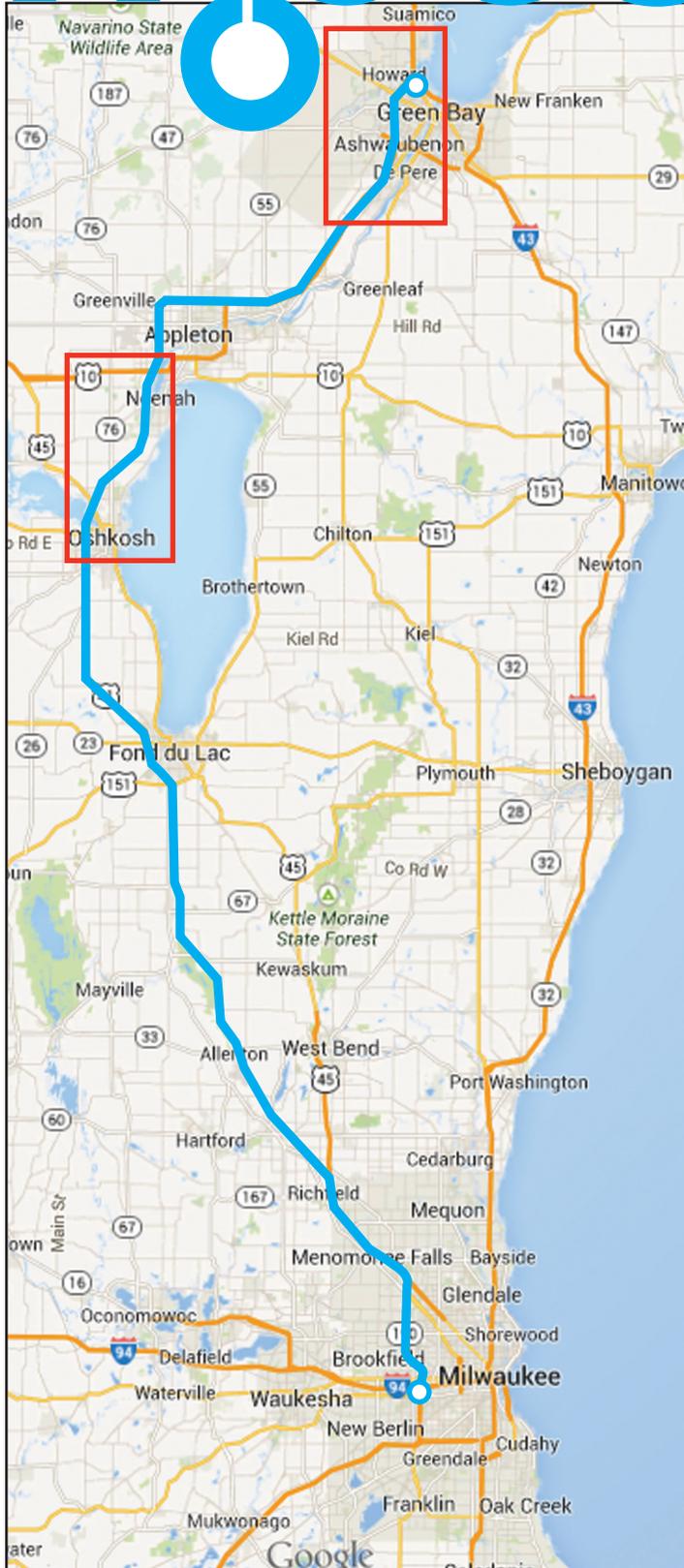


CONNECTING WISCONSIN



New corridor megaproject encourages economic growth

BY KATHY CURREN, SR/WA AND KATE SHIRLEY

For regional economies looking to expand and grow, interstate highway access is crucial. Historically, proximity to an interstate highway has stimulated growth, and for the cities that line the corridor connecting the northeast and southeast parts of Wisconsin, a lack of vital connectivity was clearly preventing them from realizing their full economic potential. An important economic artery, this corridor provides critical transportation for moving goods and services within Wisconsin and other key markets outside the state.

All in all, the US 41 corridor runs through nine counties, which are responsible for 40 percent of the state's overall economic activity and 40 percent of the state's population and workforce. It also services 60 of the 100 largest Wisconsin-based companies. With completion of this project scheduled for 2017, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) will improve both safety and mobility in northeast Wisconsin.

Elevating the Status

The largest highway undertaking in northeast Wisconsin's history, the US 41 Project involves reconstructing and upgrading the highway in Brown and Winnebago Counties to achieve interstate status. Linking up with I-94 in Milwaukee and I-43 in Green Bay, the interstate will eventually connect Chicago and southeastern Wisconsin to the Fox Valley and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Another project also benefitting the US 41 corridor is the interstate conversion project. It was conceived nearly ten years ago, when the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient, Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users was signed into law in August 2005. At the time, the US 41 corridor was identified as having strong potential for a future interstate route. The main reason was because it connects the Fox River Valley with Southeast Wisconsin – two areas that comprise more than half the state's population and the majority of its workforce and manufacturing facilities. Interstate status will elevate US 41 from a locally known freeway to a nationally recognized corridor guaranteed to provide the mobility services and safety that large

corporations look for when deciding where to expand.

The overall objective of the massive reconstruction in Brown and Winnebago counties is to provide a safe and efficient regional and state transportation corridor that enhances the communities it serves. It seeks to accomplish this through various system upgrades, including new traffic lanes, the addition of roundabouts, improved interchanges and ramps, lighting and other safety features, as well as biking and pedestrian trails.

The total cost of the project is estimated at \$1.515 billion, of which \$91 million is projected for real estate acquisition. The reconstruction of US 41 in Winnebago and Brown counties are funded through a mixture of 27 percent state funds, 26 percent federal funds and 47 percent bond funds. Four segments of the project received funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act because overall, the project will serve to revitalize the area and create job opportunities in Northeast Wisconsin.

Improving Safety

In recent years, US 41 traffic volume and outdated construction have contributed to above-average crash rates in Winnebago and Brown counties. To make the road safer and better able to accommodate larger volumes of traffic, over 40 roundabouts will be constructed at the major interchanges. According to statistics published by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, installing roundabouts has been shown to decrease crash rates by 39 percent, injuries by 76 percent, and fatalities and/ or incapacitating injuries by 90 percent. Initially, there was a great deal of community concern to the roundabouts, mainly because the local residents were unfamiliar with them. In response, WisDOT undertook a wide-reaching campaign to spread education, safety and information about roundabouts to the local communities.

Another way the project is adding safety measures is through the addition of bicycle and pedestrian lanes on bridge overpasses. Turn lanes will be added and loop ramps will be eliminated, replaced by safer, flatter directional ramps, which are being employed

across the board. This will allow drivers more time to speed up or slow down when entering or exiting the highway, reducing the risk of collisions.

Complex Acquisitions

To accommodate the megaproject, a total of 389 parcels of land were impacted. One of the more complex relocation challenges surfaced when it was determined that a licensed bird game farm containing unique species of ducks and geese had to be moved. The bird farm contained approximately 800 birds and 1,000 chicks that sometimes sold to wealthy clients for up to \$25,000 a pair. The timing of this move was particularly crucial because of the lasting effect such a disruption could have on the birds' future breeding potential. After a move like this, some of the birds would never be able to breed again, others would most likely not breed the season they were moved and others would perish. Since survival and breeding were unknown factors, WisDOT made the decision to purchase all of the birds, but allowed the property owner to keep them and move them. Some of the birds perished, but most survived and were able to successfully breed the following season.

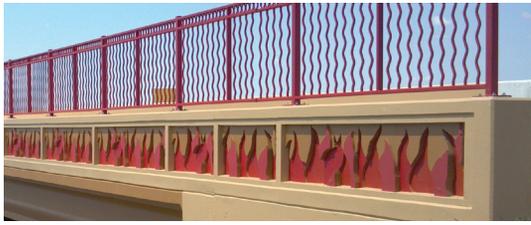
This project also impacted property owned by the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin. As the state has no eminent domain rights on tribal trust land, negotiation is the only option for clearing the right of way. In addition, the tribe's policies preclude selling native land, so a highway easement had to be negotiated. The officials from the Oneida Tribe and WisDOT met early and often to discuss the benefits

of highway safety improvements while still maintaining the integrity of the land. There were also monthly meetings with some of the Oneida Tribe's Division of Land Management staff to help facilitate the communication and ease procedural differences. The typical easement documents used by the Agency were not compatible with tribal government or their standard operating procedures, so a great deal of time and effort went into creating a compromise that would be acceptable to both parties. The length of the easement term was negotiated and a deposit equal to the value of the acquisition was placed into a trust account on all parcels held in trust. In the end, an easement was acquired. In recognition, the Federal Highway Administration awarded WisDOT and the Oneida Tribe with the Tribal Partnership Award at the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials Annual Conference in 2012.

Another potential challenge involved the partial acquisition of a gas station and convenience store to accommodate a nearby roundabout. The circuitry of travel was altered once the roundabout was installed, and in the after-condition, the road moved around the back of the gas station to line up with the roundabout. The gas station owner installed a semi truck scale during construction as well as a special parking area for semi trucks. The different types of land involved resulted in different values, as well as several layers of ownership. In this case, the property owner held a ground lease with the owner of the gas station, who also sublet part of the convenience store to two fast food



Since roundabouts are proven to dramatically reduce traffic incidents, they are one of the many enhanced safety features that are a part of the US 41 Project.



Consulting with local Native American Tribes on aesthetics that fit with their culture and customs, these bridge designs in Winnebago County represent fire, water and earth.

the same site, two had leases that were allowed to expire and two had the slope intercepts pulled in so the billboard could remain. One of the billboards had to be reduced by one-third in order to stay out of the new right of way yet accommodate the local municipality's zoning rules, and one sign was declared illegal and ordered removed entirely because it had been installed on the wrong parcel and was 50 percent in the existing right of way.

Focus on Community

As anyone in the right of way profession knows, community opposition can often make or break a project, especially with one of this size and scope. With that in mind, WisDOT committed itself early on to a strategic outreach plan. The comprehensive plan was designed to keep information flowing throughout the entire seven-year project. Project communications consist of a website which contains important public and business information, tools for businesses, project brochures, public relations efforts, a travelers guide, and project updates. The department also keeps the community engaged through newsletters, mailings and social media outreach like Twitter and Facebook.

Furthermore, the project team took pains to curtail disruptions for highway commuters while at the same time minimizing environmental impacts. WisDOT's roadway contracts required US 41 to remain open during construction, with at least two lanes of service in each direction. Interchanges were closed to replace overpasses and rebuild ramps, as well as construct the ramp roundabouts and intersections. However, the interchange closure schedule was staggered to minimize disruptions to the communities. Local and social media outlets also distributed closure notices to ensure all residents received adequate notification.

The department also employed various community sensitive design techniques to reflect the architectural, cultural, historical and environmental fabric of

the local citizenry. WisDOT began by assembling a Citizen's Advisory Committee to provide input throughout the project design process. The design team used this feedback when creating a number of possible options that were presented both in public information meetings and on the WisDOT website for community feedback. The responses were then carefully evaluated and incorporated into the project design through the aesthetics of bridges, retaining walls, landscaping and sound barriers that work to visually unify the area. In recognition of the important role that Native American tribal negotiations played in the project, WisDOT also incorporated tribal themes into the design of structures along the project.

In Summary

The US 41 Project is meeting some lofty goals, and the payoff will be considerable. The reconstruction and upgrade of US 41 in northeast Wisconsin will benefit the entire Badger State. Additionally, the interstate conversion of US 41 will allow communities along the route to be more competitive when large corporations are looking for expansion locations. The corridor plays a vital regional role, linking the communities in its path to major Wisconsin metropolitan areas and markets as well as to the greater Chicago metropolitan area, a key regional hub. The hope is that once the highway gains interstate status, the region will be increasingly competitive in attracting business development and bringing jobs and growth to an area that is ready and waiting. 🌟

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restaurants. In situations like this, it can be difficult to reach an agreement as to how the damages check will be split. While all parties of interest were able to reach an agreement here, it still necessitated complex acquisition and negotiation efforts.

Utility and Billboard Coordination

Extensive utility relocations made up an important aspect of the US 41 project. There were 53 different utility facilities, both underground and overhead, that were relocated, including gas, electric, fiber optic, telephone, sanitary, water and overhead transmission lines. All in all, a total of \$31 million was needed for relocating compensable utilities.

Given the scope of the relocations, bimonthly utility coordination meetings involving real estate were held to give the utility and design engineers an opportunity to discuss plan changes, schedule changes, and review alternative ways to design the project around the utilities. By working closely with each utility and understanding their deadlines, WisDOT's real estate department was able to have all parcels cleared on schedule, thereby allowing the utilities to complete their projects as planned.

There were also 14 outdoor billboard signs that were impacted by the project. Six of them were acquired using the unit rule process, two were moved further back on