

I-64 Construction Update

As of Jan. 6, 2023

The I-64 Gap widening project will be completed in three segments.

Segment A is from mile marker 205 at Bottoms Bridge to mile marker 215, which is slightly more than a mile from Courthouse Road (Exit 214) in New Kent County. Segment A is about 10 miles of the 29-mile project.

For Segment A (as of January 2023, based on VDOT information):

- The Request for Qualifications (RFQ) was advertised on Dec. 16, 2022.
- The Request for Proposal (RFP) release date is anticipated for March 24, 2023.
- The contract award date is anticipated for Sept. 20, 2023.
- The completion date for Segment A is estimated to be winter 2026-27.

The schedule for Segments B and C will be finalized soon, according to VDOT.

The Virginian-Pilot

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VDOT: Next phase of I-64 widening project can go ahead

By Eliza Noe
Staff Writer

A project that will widen a portion of Interstate 64 between Williamsburg and Richmond is a step closer to reality.

The Virginia Department of Transportation announced Tuesday that the first segment of the project will advance to the Request for Qualifications phase. This means that the department will ask potential contractors to detail their background and experience in building projects like the widening project.

The project is expected to widen the 64 Gap, the 29-mile section of I-64 where the highway narrows from three to two lanes in each direction. This first segment will stretch from mile marker 205 in Bottoms Bridge to mile marker 215.6, about a mile east of Courthouse Road in New Kent County. According to



The project is expected to widen the 64 Gap, the 29-mile section of Interstate 64 where the highway narrows from three to two lanes in each direction. **ROB OSTERMAIER**

VDOT, adding a third lane will create a more efficient route for drivers traveling to and from Richmond.

The entire project has a price tag of about \$750 million. In addition to the roadway widening, the project will widen and rehabilitate multiple bridges. It will also install new overhead

signs and sound barrier walls, cameras to help with incident alerts, culvert and pipe repairs, and storm drainage and stormwater management systems.

Last week, Virginia's Democratic Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine announced \$25,000,000 in federal funding for the

expansion in New Kent County.

In the spring, VDOT will send out a Request for Proposals on the first segment, and the estimated completion of this section is winter 2026-27.

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Richmond Times-Dispatch

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\$25M grant isn't enough to close I-64 funding gap

BY MICHAEL MARTZ
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Virginia wants to close a 29-mile gap by widening Interstate 64 between Richmond and Williamsburg, but the state first has to plug a funding gap for the \$750 million project.

Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, both Virginia Democrats, recently announced the state



WATCH: Drone views of I-64 near Bottoms Bridge and West Point exits. Point your camera at the QR code, then tap the link.

received a \$25 million federal grant for the I-64 project, which officials plan to move forward to construction in three

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phases beginning next fall.

But the senators acknowledged they haven't reached the end of the road in securing the funding, despite a \$470 million state budget commitment and a pledge of \$100 million from a regional transportation authority for the Richmond area, including New Kent County, where most of the work will be done.

The "rural surface transportation" grant was provided through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act — which they helped pass and President Joe Biden signed last year — but the state has asked for a \$150 million discretionary grant under the \$1 trillion funding package.

The Virginia Department of Transportation said it submitted a single application for three grant programs under the infrastructure law, so it hopes for additional federal aid "to support funding for the full project."

Warner and Kaine promised to seek more

federal support for the project.

"We see this grant as a sign of progress toward fulfilling the [Biden] administration's commitment to closing the I-64 gap by adding a third lane all the way from Hampton Roads to Richmond, but more work needs to be done," they said in a Dec. 16 announcement.

"We are glad to see the bipartisan infrastructure law continue to deliver funding that will help improve and ease the stress on Virginia's highway system."

Warner, in a statement on Twitter, called the gap in the widened highway "unacceptable for such a critical thoroughfare" and promised to "keep pushing until the project is fully funded."

The state announced last week it released a "request for qualifications" from contractors to widen the first segment of the highway with an additional lane in each direction on an almost 11-mile stretch between Bottom's Bridge to a mile beyond the exit for New Kent

Courthouse.

The next step will be a request for proposals — expected in spring — and the award of a contract next fall to design and build the first section of the project to widen the interstate from four to six lanes. The work is scheduled to be completed in the winter of 2026-27.

The work includes the widening and rehabilitation of "multiple bridges;" installation of new overhead signs and cameras to monitor traffic incidents; construction of sound barrier walls; repair of culverts and pipes; and stormwater drainage and management.

The entire project would extend from mile marker 205 at Bottom's Bridge through New Kent and James City counties to mile marker 234 at Lightfoot in York County. The state has received approval to build the project under the National Environmental Policy Act, allowing design and construction work to begin.

Widening the highway is the top transportation priority for New Kent,

which much of the 29-mile stretch of four-lane highway crosses.

"This notoriously congested stretch of interstate disrupts one of Virginia's vital thoroughfares," said Secretary of Transportation Shep Miller, a Virginia Beach businessman who previously served on the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

"Adding a third lane in each direction will unlock the corridor, unify Richmond and Hampton Roads, grow the economy and provide opportunities for all," Miller said in a statement announcing the request for qualifications.

"The importance of connecting the Richmond and Hampton Roads regions cannot be overstated," he added.

Unless the federal government provides more money, it's unclear where Virginia will find the money to close a potential funding gap of up to \$125 million.

The two-year state budget adopted in June includes a total \$470 million commitment to the project. The Central Virginia

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Shep Miller, Virginia Secretary of Transportation

Transportation Authority committed in June to dedicating up to \$100 million for the project, and the Commonwealth Transportation Board promised an additional \$30 million.

Hampton Mayor Donnie Tuck, chairman of the Hampton Roads Transportation Accountability Commission and the region's transportation planning organization, called the project "a unanimous regional legislative prior-

ity" for his area.

"Completing the I-64 gap is critical to supporting our military, the Port of Virginia, and the Commonwealth's tourism economy," Tuck said in a statement.

Hampton Roads has already invested \$311 million in regional and local tax funds to widen I-64 in three phases over 21 miles on the Peninsula to the west side of Williamsburg, but the region hasn't committed funds yet to completing the 29-mile gap in New Kent and James City.

"The Hampton Roads Region remains committed to working with our state and federal partners to explore all funding opportunities to complete the I-64 gap, which is imperative to our regional, state, and federal economies," Tuck said.

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\$750 million lane widening won't solve congestion

By Christian Schick
Guest Columnist

In a recent unanimous vote, the Central Virginia Transportation Authority voted to commit federal, state and local dollars toward the widening of a 29-mile stretch of Interstate 64 through New Kent County. Currently, this project is open for public comment.

One of the claims was that this highway expansion would solve congestion in the region by removing a bottleneck. It's a crowd-pleaser decision that no one could disagree with.

The only problem is that America has now lived through several decades of adding lanes to its interstates while congestion has continued to outpace our efforts.

Between 1993 and 2017, Richmond added 106% more lane-miles to its highways. During that same timeframe, the population grew by 45%. Despite building at a faster rate than population growth, congestion grew by 203%. For Virginia Beach, there is a similar trend. Population only grew by 6% but congestion grew by 120%. If these numbers sound counterintuitive, we have only to look at regions of the United States that have not been shy about investing in their roads. In Houston, for instance, the widest highway in America is now 23 lanes wide and only took three years to begin its decline into worse congestion than prior to its widening in 2008.

What happened and why aren't we avoiding it?

The simple answer is induced demand. Investing in infrastructure for cars encourages more car use. We aren't avoiding more car use because we've conflated higher mileage with economic growth.

It was the conclusion of Anthony Downs that vehicle miles traveled reaches an equilibrium with lane capacity. When more lanes are added to a highway, people tend to drive more and congestion returns. He referred to it as the "fundamental law of road congestion" in 1962. It's been corroborated by Robert Cervero (2002), Robert Noland (2001) and Gilles Duranton (2011).

To see this in action, let's look at two of

the stated goals of this highway expansion project through the lens of how they might conflict:

- Decrease congestion
- Increase economic activity in the region

To decrease congestion, additional trips along that route can't increase by too much. Either the number of trips needs to stay the same or, if it does increase, it needs to increase by less than how much additional capacity the lane widening adds to the interstate.

To increase economic activity in the region, vehicle trips need to increase. Travel time savings alone can't offset a project with this high of a price tag. The magnitude of economic growth that could justify \$750 million can only be achieved from significantly more vehicle trips. Whether those additional trips compound congestion is a problem for the next highway expansion project to solve.

The balance between these two goals gives nuance to our understanding of projects that promise to solve congestion. If a lane widening project does solve congestion, it could end up being a sunk cost with no return on investment. If a lane widening project is a booming economic success, it's unlikely to solve congestion in the long term.

As this project is available for public comment and continues into construction, we need to hold policymakers accountable for promising conflicting results. Otherwise, this current \$750 million lane-widening that promises to "solve congestion" will be followed by another \$750 million lane-widening that also promises to "solve congestion."

We face a future where the commitment of escalating costs toward tepid solutions to traffic will distract us from the reality that highway expansions like this one don't spark enough economic activity to cover their own costs (see the July 4, 2021, Wall Street Journal article, "Why More Highway Spending Won't Rev Up the Economy," by David Harrison).

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OTHER VIEWS

Address larger ills to reduce traffic congestion

By Stephen Jordan
Guest columnist

On balance, the \$750 million lane widening of Interstate 64 through New Kent County is beneficial for the greater Richmond metro area. Make no mistake, it is a Band-Aid for addressing the systemic issues driving ever greater sprawl. This will continue for the foreseeable future if Richmond continues to keep doing the same things it has been doing.

In his Dec. 27 op-ed, Christian Schick lays out the case that the I-64 widening will cause more congestion problems between Richmond and Williamsburg. He cites research showing that recent investments in Virginia, Texas and elsewhere have led to car traffic growth outpacing local population growth. In Virginia Beach for example, widening led to a 120% growth in congestion despite only a 6% population increase.

To be sure, new roads and lane additions do increase the convenience and attractiveness of living outside the urban core. However, in most cities, the underlying cause of sprawl is the pressure it puts on middle- and lower-class families. Housing stock cannot keep up with the pace of demand, pushing up rents and homeowner prices accordingly. This leads to demographic inversions and gentrification in cities, and suburban and rural sprawl outside of cities.

On the flip side, ask yourself, if you have any money saved up and you live in a neighborhood where you don't feel safe, city services lag behind, and the schools aren't that great, what would you do? This helps explain why lower income residents are fleeing urban cores in major cities across the country.

According to the U.S. Census, Richmond has barely added 20,000 residents over the last decade, and only 43% of them live in homes that they own. Meanwhile, 150,000 residents have moved into the greater Richmond area and two-thirds of the residents own their homes.

Differences between supply and demand, particularly for underserved residents seeking safer neighborhoods and better schools is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Embracing enhanced access will at least keep people in the area, if not within the city limits.

The overall transportation design of the commonwealth also is driving lane expansion. If the interstate highway system were built today, there is no doubt that there would be an interstate connecting the largest (Northern Virginia) and second



Afternoon traffic on Interstate 64 is seen from the Mallory Street overpass near the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel on Oct. 14, 2020, in Hampton.

KAITLIN MCKEOWN/STAFF

largest (Hampton Roads) MSAs in the state. This would take significant pressure off of the I-64 corridor. As it was designed back in the 1950s however, all roads lead through Richmond. This means there is no way to accommodate the current and future traffic burden at least over the next 20 years, except by figuring out ways to improve I-64.

A third lane will also help to support the region's transition to autonomous vehicle solutions in the future. As Deloitte argues, automation and the digitization of personal transportation is going to lead to re-thinking of the entire architecture for vehicle transportation. Platooning, where autonomous cars or trucks in pods of 8-25 can couple and brake and accelerate simultaneously is just one of the concepts that traffic engineers and auto researchers are working on. If this is the case, the area would be well positioned for a third lane for autonomous solutions, a second lane for semi-autonomous, and a third lane for manual driving when these concepts scale up.

No policy decision is 100% beneficial to everybody but widening the lanes will deliver more benefits than drawbacks. It is symptomatic though, of much deeper developmental challenges facing the city, the region and the state. Richmond, in particular, needs to change its ways and overhaul its housing, education and safety policies if it wants to reduce regional sprawl and improve the quality of life of its residents. Until then, the region needs all the Band-Aids it can get to keep people moving.

Stephen Jordan is the CEO of the Institute for Sustainable Development, a think tank based in Alexandria.