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State signs contract for I-12 widening



[Show Caption](#) Richard Alan Hannon/The Advocate

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- Advocate Capitol News Bureau
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State officials signed a \$100 million contract on Monday to widen a section of Interstate 12 that is part of an area traffic corridor marked by traffic deaths and injuries.

The project will:

- Widen eastbound I-12 to three lanes from O'Neal Lane in Baton Rouge to just east of Pete's Highway in Denham Springs.
- Widen westbound I-12 to three lanes from just west of 4-H Club Road to the west side of the O'Neal Lane overpass.

- Install two new side-by-side bridges over the Amite River that will have three lanes each.

All the widening work also features 10-foot road shoulders.

The work is set to start in February and be finished by Thanksgiving 2011, officials said. Lane closures will be limited to nighttime and weekends.

William Ankner, secretary for the state Department of Transportation and Development, said the work will ease traffic tie-ups, even though he hoped it would extend farther east.

“We get significant relief in the bottleneck,” Ankner told reporters.

Others disagreed.

“We are fooling ourselves if we think this is going to fix our traffic,” said state Sen. Dale Erdey, R-Livingston. “We are simply moving the backlog farther east.”

The section to be widened is part of a corridor between Baton Rouge and Hammond where 10 people died in traffic accidents over a three-month period last year.

At least four people died in two accidents on I-12 near O’Neal Lane during a month-long period in mid-2007.

On Nov. 7 of this year, a six-vehicle collision near the O’Neal Lane interchange resulted in seven people being taken to area hospitals.

State traffic counts show that 80,600 vehicles per day travel past a marker just east of O’Neal, 53,600 east of Range Avenue and 49,200 east of Walker.

“I think it will help,” Rep. Bodi White, R-Central, said of plans to widen the I-12 stretch from four lanes to six lanes — three in each direction.

“We keep moving it farther east,” White said. “The farther east we go the better.”

The work will be done as part of what officials call a design/build contract. That means it will be handled by a joint team of highway designers and builders and, officials said, can be done quicker than traditional methods.

The team picked includes James Construction Group, Boh Bros. Construction Co., Evans-Graves Engineering, Volkert & Associates and GOTECH Inc.

The project has been on the state drawing boards for years. It will be funded with money from a \$1.1 billion surplus that lawmakers allocated earlier this year.

State transportation officials said in April they hoped the widening would extend from O’Neal Lane to at least Juban Road.

Ankner said some of his staff were skeptical of such hopes early on.

He said rising costs of concrete, asphalt and other materials also limited how far the \$100 million would go.

The bridge replacements will gobble up about half of the \$100 million.

Erdey said constituents are already raising concerns about the impact of the work.

“They are equally concerned that it is not going to solve our traffic congestion,” he said.

Erdey said he has asked state officials to consider reversible lanes and frontage roads to ease traffic backups.

“If that doesn’t work, what you need to do is bring six lanes to Walker,” he said.

Mike Grimmer, president of Livingston Parish, did not return a call for comment on Monday.

The plan calls for four lanes of traffic to remain open during peak times.

However, all traffic is to be moved to four westbound lanes in 2010 and into eastbound lanes in 2011. Speed limits in construction zones are tentatively set for 50 mph.

The state will also set up a project Web site that includes lane closure information, traffic pattern changes and updates on the work.

Ankner said that, while the I-12 widening will ease traffic problems, it has nothing to do with driver errors, which have been cited for some of the accidents.

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