

Frequently Asked Questions about Interstate 81 in Virginia June 2007

What's the latest on I-81?

A major milestone has been reached in the ongoing study process. The I-81 Tier 1 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) prepared by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) was approved in early June by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Approval is documented in a Record of Decision (ROD). The ROD allows VDOT to go forward with planning improvements to I-81. To read the ROD and the Tier 1 FEIS, go to www.I-81.org

What is VDOT doing to improve I-81?

VDOT is following the direction of the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB), the policy board for VDOT and the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT). In October 2006, the CTB unanimously passed a resolution about I-81 that directs VDOT to:

- implement safety and operational improvements to existing I-81, and
- improve I-81 by constructing not more than one or two general purpose lanes in each direction, only where needed, to meet future traffic demand.

The CTB's resolution also directed DRPT to conduct an I-81 Freight Rail Study with Norfolk Southern Railway to identify short-term rail improvements and to study potential long-term diversion of truck traffic to rail. The resulting data will be taken into consideration in future VDOT studies for traffic demand on I-81.

What does this mean for the idea of building separate lanes for trucks?

The proposal to build separate truck lanes is no longer under consideration. Although it was a creative idea, when measured against expected future traffic volumes, building separate lanes for use only by trucks would provide too many lanes for trucks and not enough for cars in most locations. A better solution is to widen I-81 by adding not more than one or two general purpose lanes in each direction, where needed. This is the solution endorsed by the Commonwealth Transportation Board in October 2006 and supported by the Tier 1 FEIS. There currently is no funding or timetable for widening.

Couldn't rail improvements be made instead of widening I-81?

Rail improvements complement roadway improvements. Rail alone will not solve future traffic problems. For example, if all trucks left I-81, by 2035 non-truck traffic in many urban areas will exceed the capacity of existing I-81.

To fully evaluate the potential benefits of rail in the I-81 corridor, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (see www.drpt.virginia.gov) is conducting an I-81 Freight Rail Study in cooperation with Norfolk Southern Railway. The study will identify specific short-term rail improvement projects in Virginia. In addition, the rail study will extend at least 500 miles into Tennessee and Pennsylvania to help determine potential long-term

diversion of truck traffic from I-81. Study results should be available later this year, and those results will be taken into consideration in future VDOT studies for traffic demand on I-81.

In addition, DRPT is evaluating potential locations in the Roanoke region for a new intermodal rail facility similar to the Virginia Inland Port in Front Royal. This facility could help manage truck traffic on I-81 and Route 460 and provide economic development opportunities for the region.

When will drivers see something happening on I-81?

Short-term: ramp extensions at interchanges. As part of a safety improvement program, by late 2007 drivers may see construction to extend on- and off-ramps at several interchanges. Additional ramp extension projects could get under way in spring 2008. Funding for many of these ramp projects is included in the CTB's draft Six Year Plan for 2008-13.

Mid-term: truck climbing lanes. Several locations with steep grades have been identified where climbing lanes could help traffic flow and enhance safety. Two of these are priorities – southbound I-81 in Montgomery County near Christiansburg and northbound I-81 in Rockbridge County near Fairfield. These construction projects will include opportunities for public involvement. The earliest truck climbing lanes could be ready for construction is late 2008 or early 2009. Federal funding of \$140 million is available to help build climbing lanes.

As soon as we have specifics on these short- and mid-term safety improvements, we will post information on www.I-81.org and provide details to the media and citizens.

Long-term: capacity improvements. Adding general purpose lanes to I-81 is still years in the future. Detailed site-specific environmental studies (Tier 2) are needed before any widening projects can get under way. There is no timetable for construction.

What happens to STAR Solutions, the group of companies that proposed building separate lanes for trucks along the entire length of I-81?

Negotiations continue with STAR Solutions as the potential builder of truck climbing lanes in two locations on I-81: northbound in Rockbridge County and southbound in Montgomery County. Negotiations with STAR Solutions are proceeding under Virginia's Public Private Partnership Act of 1995.

Is there a way to make trucks stay in the right lane of I-81, freeing up the left lane for cars?

This sounds good, but it doesn't work. Here's why. Confining the high volume of trucks to the right lane on I-81's up-and-down terrain would make it difficult for traffic in the left lane to enter and exit the interstate. Keeping both lanes open to all traffic is better because free flowing traffic is safer for everyone.

By the way, there is a law in Virginia that restricts trucks to the two far right lanes on a highway that has *three* or more lanes in each direction. Nearly all of I-81 is just two lanes in each direction (except for short three-lane sections on Christiansburg Mountain in Montgomery County, at the overlap of Interstate 77 at Wytheville, and near the city of Bristol). Therefore, any locations where additional lanes may be built will be subject to these truck restrictions.

Will there be tolls on I-81? Who pays, and how much?

No final decisions have been made about tolling, and it's worth noting that current Virginia law allows tolls only on trucks on I-81.

Using tolls to help pay for future I-81 widening projects appears to be a feasible funding option. A recent report shows that if there were tolls on I-81, the amount of truck traffic diverting to other roads is fairly low, about 10-12%. To keep the tolling option available, the CTB in October 2006 directed VDOT to continue its I-81 tolling application process, as allowed by federal law. Again, no decisions have been made.

How can I get a speaker to come talk to my organization about I-81?

Please feel free to call VDOT's I-81 Office of Program Management at (540) 767-6081, or send an e-mail to 81info@VDOT.Virginia.gov to request a speaker and get answers to your questions about I-81. The address for the I-81 Office of Program Management is 108 N. Jefferson St., Suite 503, Roanoke, Va. 24016.

For rail information, please call DRPT's Public Information Office at (804) 786-7432, or send an e-mail to drptpr@drpt.virginia.gov. DRPT's mailing address is 1313 E. Main St., Suite 300, Richmond, Va. 23219.

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