



Phase of U.S. 12 project lauded at ceremony

Three of eight portions of the widening are done and several more have funding in place.

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By VICKI HILLHOUSE of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA -- The celebration of the latest and largest phase in the expansion of U.S. Highway 12 on Tuesday was made all the sweeter considering the tails of fright and frustration.

One by one, 10 officials -- representing everything from local government to state agencies -- shared their personal experiences with the two-lane highway that connects Walla Walla to the Tri-Cities. From near collisions to annoying congestion to hard-fought efforts securing funding for a wider, safer highway, the anecdotes continued through the rain-soaked celebration.

But with three of the eight phases complete and the latest phase -- eight new miles of a realigned, four-lane highway -- under construction between the Frenchtown vicinity and the city of Walla Walla, the horror stories are expected to become few and far between.

"Projects are great, but the reason why we're here today is safety," Walla Walla Mayor Dan Johnson told a crowd of about 125 people who overflowed from a white canopy on the Sudbury Bench.

The event was a chance for the partnering agencies in the U.S. Highway 12 Coalition -- the city, county, College Place, Port of Walla Walla and many others -- to celebrate the progress of the more than \$120 million undertaking that's carried on over the last four-plus years.

The current stretch, phase 6, came in about \$10 million under initial estimates at a total of \$56.6 million, say officials with the state Department of Transportation. Construction, under way by contracting firm Apollo Inc., is expected to be complete by fall 2009. Construction crews are relocating the highway north of the existing one by anywhere from a quarter of a mile to a half-mile in varying stretches. Additionally, crews will construct four new intersections and an interchange at Pine Street.

The project is part of the greater corridor plan to widen U.S. Highway 12 from the Snake River Bridge to the city of Walla Walla. Only two remaining phases need funding, a fact the U.S. Highway 12 Coalition repeatedly emphasized to state and federal officials in attendance.

Local leaders and Department of Transportation officials have said the expanded highway will not only improve safety, it will help with economic vitality.

Keith Larson, vice president of Apollo Inc., said he's been frustrated over the years at how time-consuming and difficult it can be to travel between here and the Tri-Cities, where Apollo's headquarters are located.

"I always thought Walla Walla and College Place were playing hard to get," he quipped to the crowd.

Apart from accessibility, the top concern of local officials has been safety.

According to the state DOT, U.S. Highway 12 from Burbank to Walla Walla has had 1,079 collisions since 1991. Thirty of those resulted in deaths; 414 were injury collisions. The Traffic Safety Bureau estimates a 40 percent reduction in serious injury and fatal crashes on a highway improved from two lanes to four.

The project for Walla Walla has been years in the making. Walla Walla County Commissioner Dave Carey said it's one he had been told early in his 20-year political career he'd never live to see happen. The progress made in the last four years is a thrilling victory, he said.

"We have done great wonders getting where we are today," he told the group.

Carey and numerous others who spoke Tuesday lauded the efforts of state Reps. Maureen Walsh, R-College Place, and Bill Grant, D-Walla Walla, as well as U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., and Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. Murray has been an instrumental force securing federal funds for the projects.

But elected officials said it's the U.S. Highway 12 Coalition that should be praised. The cohesiveness of public and private agencies, working together for a mutual goal, has been the key to moving the project along, they said.

"Frankly it's a little surprising we're as far as we are," Walsh told the crowd. But she said the result comes from having showed federal and state officials an organized plan through collaboration and partnerships.

The efforts have more than impressed state Department of Transportation Secretary Paula Hammond, who attended the event Tuesday.

"I've heard someone say no one's as good as this group, and I think they're right," she said.

As for funding for the remaining two phases, Hammond said Walla Walla has an advocate in Don Whitehouse, the state DOT's regional administrator for the south central region.

On the ride to Walla Walla, Whitehouse apparently reinforced the need for financial help by repeating two words to Hammond: "Seven and eight. Seven and eight. Seven and eight."

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U.S. Highway 12 phases to date:

Phase 1 -- COMPLETED

McNary Pool to Attalia

Total cost: \$11.2 million

Completed August 2004

Phase 2 -- COMPLETED

State Route 124 to McNary Pool

Total cost: \$12.1 million

Completed November 2005

Phase 3 -- COMPLETED

Attalia Vicinity

Estimated total cost: \$17 million

Completed October 2007

Phase 4 -- FUNDED

Wallula to Walla Walla Corridor Study

Estimated total cost: \$5.5 million

Study timeline: Spring 2004 to summer 2009

Phase 5 -- FUNDED

Attalia Vicinity to State Route 730

Estimated total cost: \$800,000

The corridor study has identified a northerly
corridor that eliminates the need for widening

Phase 5.

Phase 6 ---- FUNDED

Frenchtown Vicinity to Walla Walla

Estimated total cost: \$56.6 million

Construction timeline: Spring 2008 to fall 2009

Cost estimates for Phases 7 and 8 will be developed as part of Phase 4.

Phase 7 -- NOT FUNDED

Nine Mile Hill to Frenchtown Vicinity

Phase 8 ---- NOT FUNDED

Wallula Junction to Nine Mile Hill

U.S. Highway 12/State Route 124 Intersection -- FUNDED

Estimated total cost: \$26.8 million

Construction timeline: Spring 2010 to fall 2011

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