

Our Opinion: Ponder this: I-10 widening could have lasted longer

Published: 06.15.2007

Be careful. Be courteous. Be prepared. And if you've got a schedule to keep, be early.

That should be your mantra for the next three years if you travel through or into Tucson on Interstate 10.

With a massive widening project beginning Friday, driving on I-10 will be an entirely different and likely trying experience until the work is finished - in spring 2010.

Victor E. Mendez, director of the Arizona Department of Transportation, called this the biggest project in the history of the department.

The numbers are staggering. It will cost \$200 million to add a lane to each direction of a 4 1/2-mile stretch of I-10. And because the freeway is elevated, the work is especially complex.

Entrance and exit ramps will be closed through the entire work zone for the duration. And streets under I-10 will be pinched down often, and sometimes closed entirely on weekends, as seven bridges are demolished and rebuilt.

Given the scope of the work, it is understandable there will be major disruptions.

But if it is any consolation, it could have been far worse.

The project was originally to be done in three phases lasting 10 years. But city officials objected, saying that would be crippling. They asked the state to do the work all at once.

To its credit, the state agreed. Money was assembled for one large project, and

extensive planning has resulted in a commitment to complete work in one-third the time originally scheduled.

Other steps have been taken to ease the pain.

Once the traffic pattern is established, it will remain largely unchanged.

A traffic information center with cameras monitoring the entire construction zone is online. And by dialing 511, you can navigate hands-free through traffic alerts, using only voice prompts.

Contractors will be encouraged to work quickly, with a bonus of \$23,000 for every day the work is completed early. There will be penalties of the same amount for late completion.

Government offices downtown have increased telecommuting and flex schedules. And the city, state and Regional Transportation Authority have partnered to run express rush-hour Sun Tran lines between downtown and the I-10-Cortaro intersection.

The state and city have done a lot of preparation to make all of this as painless as possible. But it will require our patience, planning and understanding.