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Work on bypass finally beginning

Detours paving way for first leg of construction

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LAHAINA PLAN DECADES IN THE MAKING

LAHAINA - Shovels have met dirt as construction has begun, at least preliminarily, on the Lahaina bypass.

It's a project more than 20 years in its discussion, planning and design stages, and memories are unclear as to when someone first had the idea of building an alternative road mauka of Lahaina town and its congested Honoapiilani Highway.

"I'm just ecstatic we are finally getting going," said state Rep. Angus McKelvey, whose district includes Lahaina, Kaanapali and Kapalua. "It's a huge project the people of West Maui have been waiting for if not years, but for generations."

McKelvey said his first recollection of the bypass being discussed was when he was in grade school at Sacred Hearts in Lahaina.

A November 1988 draft environmental impact statement for the project described "great congestion" on Honoapiilani Highway, and "without improvements this congestion is expected to increase as the future traffic is estimated to double within the project design period," what was then the year 2007.

Meanwhile, according to the 2007 Maui County Data Book, the resident population of Lahaina grew from 14,574 in April 1990 to 17,967 in April 2000, when the last census was taken. The figures don't include visitors in the resort area or new residents since 2000.

In the past, the bypass project has been hung up over its route alignment and costs. Most recently, the project was stalled with problems over a contract bid dispute and the discovery of archaeological sites along the project route.

Hawaiian Dredging Construction Co. began work on detours around Lahainaluna Road on Dec. 29 in preparation for construction of the first phase of the project, expected to launch in April.

The bypass's first phase will provide an alternative route to subdivision residents as well as students and staff at Lahainaluna High, Lahaina Intermediate and Princess Nahienaena Elementary schools, which all now rely on Lahainaluna Road as their only access road. Other phases of the bypass will extend it eventually from Honokowai to Launiupoko, with connections on Honoapiilani Highway at both ends.

McKelvey said the bypass's first phase will not only alleviate traffic along busy Lahainaluna Road and other streets, it also will make it safer for motorists and pedestrians.

Article Photos



A motorist traveling on Lahainaluna Road passes construction of the temporary road Friday morning. The path will divert traffic around the Lahaina bypass construction.

The Maui News / AMANDA COWAN photo

Bob Pure, project manager for the community group Lahaina Bypass Now, which has been pushing for the project for three years, shares McKelvey's enthusiasm.

"I'm absolutely thrilled that the road has finally started," he said. "I've talked to a lot of kupuna who have been here a long time . . . They never thought it would be built in their lifetime."

But some are still skeptical. The project's original route would have come in contact with archaeological sites along its path from Lahainaluna Road to the Keawe Street extension.

The state has since realigned the highway to avoid the sites and pushed a portion of the bypass makai of the cultural areas. Archaeologists found the area to be a large complex of agricultural terraces, according to a study.

"This route seems to be OK. But that doesn't guarantee there will be no burials," said Charles Kauluwehi Maxwell Sr., chairman of the Maui/Lanai Islands Burial Council.

He said the council has held up plans for the bypass in the past when "numerous" archaeological sites have been found in the path of the project.

At a December community meeting on the bypass, an archaeologist said two piles of rocks cleared from fields in the plantation era were found along the new route, but tests of the piles showed no ancient sites or bones underneath.

State officials maintain that they've worked with the community, including Native Hawaiians, on the road's realignment.

Work now is moving forward on the \$48 million, half-mile Lahaina bypass phase 1A, which will begin the bypass from Lahainaluna Road along Ikena Avenue, just below the schools. It will allow traffic to avoid the often-jammed Lahainaluna-Honoapiilani intersection and eventually connect to Keawe Street, which intersects with the highway at the Lahaina Cannery Mall.

Maui County has committed to extending Keawe Street mauka, connecting it with the bypass.

So far, workers have been preparing detour areas and doing other tasks to prepare for the major construction project, said state Department of Transportation spokeswoman Tammy Mori.

Heavy construction work on the bypass itself is scheduled to begin the first week of April. The work will close Ikena Avenue, she said, and a detour road will be available to motorists.

When the heavy work begins, it will initially focus on the southern segment around Lahainaluna Road and the Ikena Avenue alignment and will not touch the realignment area at the north portion.

Work includes construction of a two-lane highway along the original Ikena Avenue alignment, along with an underpass to allow the bypass to go under Lahainaluna Road.

Mori said an environmental assessment for the northern realigned portion of the Lahaina bypass should be finalized by next month.

The northern realigned portion was pushed makai of the original route to Keawe Street to avoid a 32-acre cultural area that extends from Kahoma Stream.

Mori said the cost of the project remains at \$48 million, but the state is discussing costs of the realigned portion with Hawaiian Dredging.

State Sen. Roz Baker, whose district includes West Maui and South Maui, said she and other Maui legislators and state Transportation Department Director Brennon Morioka are determined to move the project forward.

She said she was pleased that work could begin on the southern portion of Phase 1A while issues were being worked out with the realigned northern portion.

"That's the kind of thing we need to do more of . . . run things on parallel tracks," she said.

To make sure the rest of the project receives money to proceed, Baker and McKelvey said they are seeking funds from the federal stimulus package.

Baker said the more federal money received for projects like this, the more money the state will have to fund other projects.

"As we know, there's plenty of road projects to do," she said.

McKelvey said the Lahaina bypass is also a "top project" listed in the "Highways Modernization Plan" presented by Gov. Linda Lingle and state lawmakers. The plan calls for spending \$4.2 billion on state highways over six years. Projects would be funded by conditional future increases in the fuel tax, state vehicle registration fees, the vehicle weight tax and rental car surcharges that are projected to begin mid-2011. Because of the downturn in the economy, state officials said the proposed increases would take effect only when the state experiences a 1 percent job growth over two consecutive quarters, as determined by the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism.

McKelvey said he knows there are going to be disruptions during construction of the bypass road, but he asked people to be patient while the state tries to minimize inconveniences.

He said people can contact him if there are problems, and he can forward those concerns to state transportation officials. McKelvey can be reached at his Oahu office at 586-6160 or via e-mail at repmckelvey@capitol.hawaii.gov. To call toll free, dial 984-2400, followed by the last five digits of his phone numbers and press the pound sign (#).

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