

# Florida unveils massive, quicker fix for gridlocked Interstate 4

Once estimated to last 25 years, the next, 14-mile phase of improvements will take only ten

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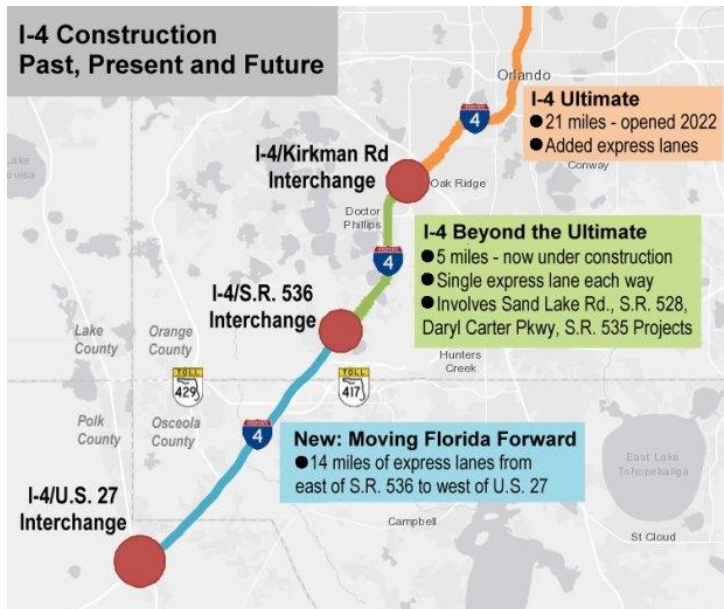
<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2024/03/05/florida-unveils-massive-quicker-fix-for-gridlocked-interstate-4/>

Florida's transportation department unveiled on Tuesday its vision for a vastly accelerated answer to horrendous congestion along Interstate 4, extending from the tourism corridor in west Orange County through the explosion of residential growth in west Osceola and north Polk counties.

Costing an estimated \$2.5 billion, the latest I-4 overhaul will stretch 14 miles, starting in the east at State Road 536 near Disney Springs, crossing a 7-mile section of Osceola County that includes the ChampionsGate community, and ending at U.S. Highway 27 in Polk County to the west. It could be done in a decade.

As presented in an industry forum to nearly 400 prime builders, subcontractors and specialty companies at an Orlando International Airport conference hall, the project will match accelerated state funding with an approach called a "phased design build" that speeds up construction.

The center median of the rebuilt interstate will include toll lanes, which DOT calls express lanes, and space for passenger rail tracks for Brightline or another train company.



Until recently, the project wasn't a project, but a list of separate initiatives on paper, some without funding prospects or design work. Altogether it was slated to take as much as a quarter of a century to complete.

The 14-mile overhaul, assembled into a single vision at the industry forum Tuesday and still without a name, will take much less time.

"It's a 10-year project," Kati Sherrard, construction program manager for DOT's Corridors Program Office of her agency's goal with construction bidding yet to come. "Finishing 10 years from today."

As Central Florida's busiest road, that stretch of I-4 now carries 200,000 vehicles daily, with the count expected to reach 250,000 daily by 2050.

The scale of construction and the finished product are likely to suggest to drivers a repeat of Florida's most costly road project ever, the top-to-bottom, recently finished overhaul of Interstate 4 from Seminole County through Orlando – the \$2.4 billion I-4 Ultimate project.

"Essentially, that's what it is," said DOT spokesperson Jessica Ottaviano.

The 14-mile road project between Disney and U.S. 27 will extend another enormous project now underway, a 5-mile overhaul of I-4 called Beyond the Ultimate spanning from S.R. 536 at Disney to Kirkman Road. The cost of that project work is more than \$460 million.

The Beyond the Ultimate project, in turn, added to the completed 21-mile I-4 Ultimate project from Kirkman Road to State Road 434 in Seminole County.

All told, that's more than 40 miles of modern interstate from southwest Seminole County to north Polk County.

As it stands today, a 12-mile segment of I-4, from the State Road 528 Beachline Expressway to the State Road 429 Orlando beltway ranks as the nation's 10th most congested corridor and Florida's worst, according to the 2022 Global Traffic Scorecard of INRIX, a provider of traffic data and analysis.

That stretch of road, bogging down to a stop-and-go pace routinely, is in the company of Chicago, Los Angeles and New York corridors.

Tourism fuels a large portion of the heavy traffic on I-4 west of Orlando, while the enormous amount of growth along the interstate also contributes.

DOT's spokesperson, Ottaviano, said her agency expects significant challenges in maintaining the flow of tourism and commuter traffic during construction.

The transportation department soon will begin to seek bids for the project, putting heightened emphasis on the need for approaches that ensure smooth traffic, she said.



As seen from Daryl Carter Parkway near Disney Springs, construction continues on Interstate 4

Rebuilding Interstate 4 from Seminole County through Orlando was particularly vexing for contractors because of the narrow footprint available for construction equipment and materials, temporary lanes and ongoing construction.

There will be at least one big difference between the I-4 Ultimate project from Seminole County through Orlando and the 14-mile overhaul.

The I-4 Ultimate project came to life more than a decade ago as a public-private partnership, relying heavily on participants to finance construction and then profit from repayment.

State officials touted that arrangement as lessening risk to taxpayers while tackling as much work at once as normally occurs in 10 projects.

With that private financing, much of the control over construction was ceded to the joint venture of major builders that won the job from the state.

But I-4 Ultimate incurred many setbacks, including the deaths of five workers on the job, and ended a year late and more than \$100 million over budget.

The Florida Department of Transportation now shies away from public-private partnerships for road jobs.

Last year, Gov. Ron DeSantis and the legislature carved out \$4 billion for transportation improvements in an overall program called Moving Florida Forward aimed at 20 projects statewide. That allocation will be coupled with revenue from construction bonds.

Ottaviano said DOT will retain closer construction control over the 14-mile overhaul of I-4, having formed a dedicated team of managers and specialists drawn from across the state. Work will begin late this year with designing and site clearing.