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‘A legacy project’: New section of U.S. Highway 95 opens south of Moscow after years of legal battles

Mon., July 14, 2025



A van drives on a new four-lane section of U.S. Highway 95 on Wednesday south of Moscow, Idaho. Five miles of the new 6-mile divided highway opened to traffic on July 1. Construction on the last mile of the highway is scheduled to be finished later this year. (Geoff Crimmins/For The Spokesman-Review)



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A 26-year dream to make U.S. Highway 95 a four-lane highway between Moscow, Idaho, and Lewiston is almost a reality.

The long-awaited four-lane, 6-mile stretch of Highway 95 from the southern end of Moscow to Reisenauer Hill opened to drivers earlier this month, according to the Idaho Transportation Department. About one more mile of widened highway and a bridge over Thorn Creek, which are expected to be finished this fall, is all that's left to complete.

The new highway has been repeatedly delayed over the years by an environmental group's lawsuits challenging the transportation project.

The nearly \$90 million highway realignment not only creates more lanes, but makes the road straighter, flatter and safer, according to Megan Jahns, ITD senior public information officer in Coeur d'Alene. The old two-lane highway has sharp curves, steep hills and several driveways intersecting the highways, leading to several injury and fatal crashes over the years, Jahns said.

From 2020 to 2024, four people died in three crashes on the 6-mile stretch, according to Jahns. Two of the three crashes were head-on collisions and all of the crashes involved impaired or distracted drivers. Eighty-five crashes were reported during that five-year period, Jahns said.

Jahns said the additional lanes, which can accommodate more traffic for the growing region, will reduce the likelihood of head-on crashes and fewer driveways and intersections along the highway will lessen the opportunities for drivers pulling out in front of motorists speeding down the highway. Fewer curves and flatter grades will allow drivers to have a better line of sight, she said. Shoulders will be widened as well.

The new highway alignment ties into the old alignment by Reisenauer Hill and Thorn Creek Road on the southern end of the project. The North Latah Highway District will assume ownership of the old section of highway, which will be renamed Reisenauer



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“I think there have been so many people at ITD out of the office who have worked on this project, and it has outlived some people in their careers at ITD, so to accomplish this is such a feat,” Jahns said.

Construction of the project outlived project manager Ken Helm, but Helm, who worked out of ITD’s Lewiston office from 1978 to 2022, accomplished his job in designing the project and putting it out to bid before he retired. He said it was the largest Moscow-area project in his career.

Plans first started in 1999 when ITD began efforts to expand Highway 95 to four lanes from the top of Lewiston Hill to Moscow, according to the transportation department.

Helm worked on all three phases of the Lewiston to Moscow highway widening project, and he said the Moscow to Thorn Creek Road phase was supposed to be the first one to be completed. But lawsuits delayed that phase of the project so crews completed the Lewiston to Genesee phase first and then Genesee to Thorn Creek Road second.

“I’m very excited for it and it’s been a long while since we’ve finished the other two projects, and I just hope the public likes it,” Helm said. “I think they do. Everybody I’ve talked to is really excited about it and that makes me excited, so it was a good way to finish my career.”

Helm said he drove Thursday through the new stretch of highway for the first time since they opened it and felt great about it.

He said he anticipates the abundant fatality crashes on the old highway to be “drastically reduced,” which was the biggest goal of the project.

“It’s gonna save lives and I feel really good about all of it,” Helm said.

Battling string of lawsuits

Over the years, the Paradise Ridge Defense Coalition sued ITD and other public agencies, saying the realignment project would destroy native Palouse Prairie, which less than 1% remains today, and several wetlands.



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Jahns said the coalition first sued in 2003 saying ITD needed to conduct a more “rigorous” environmental review of the project.

The eastern route was eventually chosen after a multiyear environmental review process, according to ITD. The Federal Highway Administration issued a Record of Decision for the project in 2016, giving the transportation department authority to begin final design and purchase land.

The coalition sued again over the methodology and selection of the eastern route, Jahns said. The U.S. District Court for Idaho ruled in favor of the highway administration and ITD in 2017.

The coalition appealed the U.S. District Court’s decision in 2018 and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld the lower court’s decision later that year.

ITD was moving closer toward construction when the coalition sued ITD and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in March 2022 over the project’s effect on wetlands.

Jahns said construction started in June that year in areas that did not have wetlands, “but even then it got to the point that the project did incur significant cost overruns due to the delays from the lawsuit and the challenges over those wetland permits.”

The bridge over Thorn Creek is a costly adjustment project design officials made to avoid affecting that wetland, Jahns said. After further wetlands analysis and changing the project design, the coalition withdrew its lawsuit and the Army Corps of Engineers reissued permits in September 2023, she said.

Jahns said the final lawsuit, wetland permit challenges and the resulting design change and construction impacts led to a more than \$20 million cost increase to the project, with the bridge being a big portion of that cost.

With the project nearly complete, coalition member Steve Flint wrote in an email that the conservation group will be watching progress with weed control and revegetation.



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ground along this route was within the likely distance for weed spread, so this is still a concern.”

Moscow Mayor Art Bettge said inflation drove the cost of the project by tens of millions of dollars from the time the section of highway was originally supposed to be constructed to now. As for the litigation, he called it “death by a thousand cuts” because every time a lawsuit or appeal was settled, another one would arise.

“Every time you thought you had it settled, here comes something else,” Bettge said. “It was quite frustrating I think for everybody to be hanging in this legal limbo.”

Bettge, who’s served on the city’s Planning and Zoning Commission, City Council or as mayor the last 22 years, saw the project slowly progress since around the turn of the century. He’s always been in favor of the highway realignment because of the safety issues, including crashes, the old, meandering highway posed.

“I am glad to see that highway completed, and it will be safer for everybody,” Bettge said.

So far, he said the new highway seems to be “welcomed with open arms by anybody who’s driven on it.”

“With the passage of more years, people are gonna forget how truly horrible the old alignment was,” Bettge said.

Jahns said the project is one of the most important Moscow transportation projects.

“It is definitely a legacy project,” she said.

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