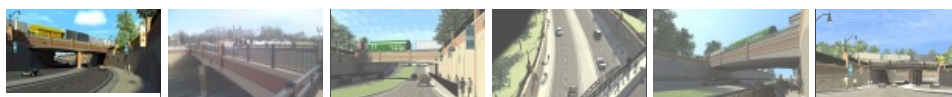


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Waiting for gridlock relief in Munster



An artist's rendering shows the southwest view of the 45th Street grade separation in Munster.

January 03, 2015 8:30 pm • [Lu Ann Franklin Times Correspondent](#)

MUNSTER | Plans to eliminate major traffic gridlock on Calumet Avenue at the Canadian National railroad tracks date back more than 70 years as part of a plan backed by Henry Ford.

Construction of a bridge over the railroad tracks for vehicles was slated to begin in the summer of 1942. However, those plans came to a screeching halt in December 1941 with America's entry into World War II.

In 2004, the Munster Town Council and Munster Redevelopment Commission began looking at the problem that now includes long traffic backups on 45th Street with a different solution in mind.

That solution focuses on a two-phase grade separation project known as the Calumet Avenue overpass/underpass. Rather than build one bridge at Calumet Avenue for vehicles as Henry Ford

envisioned, the plan calls for construction of two bridges to elevate the railroad tracks and two underpasses where vehicles will travel unimpeded by trains.

South Holland-based Robinson Engineering is in charge of the overall design work for both phases.

Phase 1 will realign 45th Street with the stoplights at Calumet Avenue and West 45th Street, said Jim Mandon, Munster town engineer who is retiring in mid-January.

"The design will take 45th Street at a 45-degree angle just to the west of Southwood Drive through the former Munster Steel property," he said of the concept that will have vehicles traveling through a tunnel-like structure under the elevated railroad track.

Mandon said design work on this phase is about 60 percent complete with final plans expected in the fall of 2015. Robinson Engineering has added the bridge-building firm of H.W. Lochner Inc. as a subcontractor to construct the elevated railroad track for Phase 1.

"You have to go much higher for the elevated train track to have room for a large truck to go under it safely," he said.

As part of the design for the elevated concrete bridge, a temporary track called a shoo-fly would be built so trains can use the tracks during construction, Mandon said.

Although initiated by Munster, the Calumet Avenue overpass/underpass has grown into a regional, bi-state project and one of the largest local public agency projects in the state of Indiana.

"It will benefit many more communities than Munster," Mandon said.

Thousands of vehicles funnel into the Calumet Avenue/CN track area from the Borman Expressway on the north, U.S. 30 from the south and from Illinois by way of West 45th Street, he said.

Each phase will cost approximately \$26 million to \$28 million, "plus or minus several million. Phase 1 will take two construction seasons," Mandon said. "We're looking to INDOT (the Indiana Department of Transportation) to fund construction of the project."

The underpass/overpass project already has \$3.9 million in federal funds, some financing from the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission and money being set aside from Munster's tax increment financing district redevelopment fund.

While funding sources continue to be sought, other preparation work continues, including identifying utilities in the right-of-way such as pipelines, fiber optic lines and sewer lines, Mandon said.

When completed about six years after Phase 1 construction begins, the Calumet Avenue overpass/underpass project will relieve what has been called the most congested train-impacted intersection in Northwest Indiana or the south suburbs.

During the last 10 years, the freight trains using the two sets of tracks have increased in both number and length, Mandon said.

The most recent study shows that each day 26 freight trains of 100-plus cars use the tracks owned by CN, which are also being leased to the CSX railroad, he said.

In addition, Mandon said, about 20 percent of the time on Calumet Avenue two trains are traveling on the tracks, sometimes in opposite directions and not always simultaneously.

"Traffic waits for one train to clear the intersection and the gates to go up only to have another train come from the opposite direction," he explained



Vehicles idling for long periods of time waiting for trains on the Calumet Avenue and 45th Street corridors also contribute to air pollution, Mandon said.

"Now, it all depends on the money," he said.

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