

DelDOT deals with virus as projects stay on fast track

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Traffic merges down to one lane heading east on Lebanon Road and South State Street during road construction in Dover. Delaware State News/Marc Clery

DOVER — While the spread of COVID-19 has slowed down most of Delaware since March, including the education and business sectors, the Delaware Department of Transportation has remained in the fast lane.

In fact, DelDOT announced last week that it has completed a variety of infrastructure projects in two of the three counties across the state — with none finished yet in Kent County — during the first half of 2020, totaling nearly \$100 million in infrastructure investments.

“While the pandemic presented unexpected challenges, our employees and contractors continued to innovate and find ways to not only continue working, but expedite work by taking advantage of the significant decline in traffic volumes statewide,” Secretary of Transportation Jennifer Cohan said in a statement.

Gov. John Carney admitted that this has been a strange year so far, with many businesses just trying to survive the COVID-19 crisis amid a continuous cycle of state restrictions designed to stop the spread of the virus.

“This has been an unusual year, but we continue to press forward on the largest infrastructure program in Delaware’s history,” Gov. Carney said in a statement. “Investments in our public infrastructure create good jobs, make our roadways safer, reduce the time we all spend in traffic and generally improve quality of life for all Delawareans.”

Charles “C.R.” McLeod, director of community relations for DelDOT, said keeping its workers and contractors safe was a high priority during the spring construction work.

“The safety of all employees has been and remains paramount as infrastructure work has continued across the state over the past several months,” Mr. McLeod said. “Construction projects provide thousands of jobs in our state, and we wanted these projects to continue while ensuring the health and safety of the workers.

“Working with the guidance of the Division of Public Health and communicating with our employees and contractor community, we have been able to keep projects going by following the protective rules and guidelines the state has mandated to slow the spread of COVID-19, which includes limiting the size of crews doing fieldwork to ensure that no more than two people are in a vehicle at the same time, social distancing on worksites and the use of face masks when working in close proximity to others.”

Mr. McLeod added that the reduced number of travelers on the highways and roads during the pandemic helped make the work easier — and safer.

“One of the most frequent questions we receive is when a project will be completed, and being able to complete a number of projects across the state totaling nearly \$100 million, given the challenges presented by the pandemic, is something we take pride in,” he said. “We were able to expedite work while traffic volumes were greatly reduced, and our employees and contractors deserve credit for their work and flexibility.”

Three projects have been completed in Sussex County so far this year, including the Milton Rails to Trails project, which included the installation of 1,600 feet of trail and the conversion of a railroad trestle to a pedestrian and cyclist bridge.

“When looking back at the first six months of the year, I would say that I am most impressed with the fact that the completed infrastructure projects impact all modes of transportation across the state,” Mr. McLeod said. “While maintaining and improving our roads and bridges is critical to our

transportation system, DelDOT continues to invest in public transportation and safety and accessibility for pedestrians and bicyclists whether on low-stress trails or in our communities.”

Two other projects have also been finished in Delaware’s beach resort area, including the completion of the Del. 1 Lewes-Rehoboth Canal Bridge rehabilitation. DelDOT said it was a significant project that involved replacing the bridge’s concrete decks, approach slabs, joints and bearings; correcting the vertical alignment; realigning the beams; repairing concrete chipping; strengthening concrete piers; sealing concrete abutments and piers; and stabilizing the canal banks.

In addition, paving of Del. 1 in the “Forgotten Mile” and in Dewey Beach has been completed, from the canal bridge to just south of Dewey, with pedestrian improvements at intersections.

New Castle County has been the site of the majority of DelDOT projects through the first half of 2020. Highlights of construction in the state’s northernmost county include:

- **Marl Pit Road roundabout** — This project reconfigured the previously existing four-way-stop intersection to a roundabout. Improvements included new asphalt roadways, curbs and gutters, shared-use paths, median islands, a drainage system and street lighting.
- **Main Street, Newark** — The entire roadway between Washington Street and the Trabant parking garage was rebuilt, as well as constructing new bump-outs and drainage improvements. Traffic and pedestrian signals also were upgraded.
- **Wilmington Transit Center** — The new transit center, which opened in May, has the capacity to have up to 10 buses stage at one time, allowing bus layovers without blocking city streets, and offers riders a smoke-free, covered, seated waiting area, as well as real-time bus displays, ticket sales, WiFi, USB charging stations, vending machines and bike racks with a bike repair station.
- **Paper Mill Road bridge rehabilitation** — Replaced a failing bridge culvert, ranked fourth worst by DelDOT, over the Middle Run Tributary with a new precast concrete box culvert.
- **Del. 1 paving from Odessa to Smyrna** — A 10-mile section of Del. 1 between Middletown and Smyrna was paved in both directions to improve the road surface.
- **Christina River bridge and approach roads** — This project built a new 470-foot multimodal bridge over the Christina River that includes two 12-foot travel lanes, a separated 14-foot-wide bicycle and pedestrian path and more than 1.5 miles of new and improved roads, sidewalks and parking.

Contractors were pleased that DelDOT pressed forward through the COVID-19 pandemic to get the work done.

“Although this spring presented unprecedented challenges to Delaware, DelDOT saw opportunity to expedite public works projects while keeping Delawareans employed,” Bryon Short, executive vice president of the Delaware Contractors Association, said in a statement. “Working together, DelDOT

and DCA's highway contractors pushed to ensure projects were expedited for the convenience of the traveling public while protecting both the safety of workers and taxpayer investments.”

Brian Bolender, president of the American Council of Engineering Companies' Delaware branch, said that keeping infrastructure sound throughout the state is important to everybody.

“Infrastructure in our state is critical to the economy,” he said. “We are grateful to the leadership at DelDOT for being innovative during unprecedented times. Working hand in hand with the department, we have been successful in getting many of these projects completed ahead of schedule.”

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