

# Coronavirus hasn't stopped Michigan road construction season

[Kathleen Gray](#) Detroit Free Press

The orange construction barrels are starting to appear on local and state roadways, despite the coronavirus crisis sweeping the state.

The pandemic isn't stopping some road projects from moving forward, although construction season won't get fully underway until later in April.

At the moment, road workers are considered essential workers in the state. Federal, state and local funds are committed to projects and delaying them would complicate future construction schedules, said Jeff Cranson, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Transportation.

But the situation remains fluid, he added, and the state is taking action so if there are delays on projects because workers feel uncomfortable going to work during the crisis, contractors won't get penalized for those delays.

"In cases where a contractor feels they cannot begin or continue work because of concerns about their workforce, supply chains or other things related to COVID-19, the delays will be excusable and damages will not be assessed," Cranson said.

One benefit for road crews has been less traffic on the roads, with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's stay-at-home order.

"If the stay at home order is a prolonged thing, one benefit is not having to worry about the safety of our workers with all the traffic whizzing by," Cranson said.

**More:** Pedestrian bridge collapses on WB I-94 in Detroit, all lanes closed

**More:** As coronavirus cases rise, here are the challenges Michigan faces in setting up field hospitals

Drivers, in turn, haven't had to deal with traffic gridlock at ongoing projects like the huge I-75 widening through Oakland County or repairs being done on the Southfield Freeway in Wayne County or work to replace bridges on I-94 through Detroit.

And there is no red on traffic maps and few, if any, crashes to report on morning and afternoon drive-time radio shows.

# Local road crews taking precautions

Meanwhile, local road crews are taking precautions, said Denise Donohue, executive director of the County Road Association of Michigan.

Many local road commissions are mandating only one person per construction truck, instead of doubling up and making sure that crews have only their own tools in the trucks.

“Every road agency has to decide for themselves on things like should their workers be sheltering in place,” she said. “They’ve also had to identify how do they comply with the Open Meetings Act. Boards of road commissioners have to meet and sign off on projects.”

But local crews are at least doing necessary maintenance such as fixing or replacing guard rails, filling dangerous potholes and doing some tree trimming that may not look like an essential service, but that needs to be done at this time of year to avoid the spread of diseases, such as oak wilt in oak trees.

“I have talked to some road agencies who are on call and only taking care of emergencies,” Donohue said. “But I’m also talking to agencies where the average daily traffic counts are way down, so it’s making it safer for their employees to be out there.”

MS2, an Ann Arbor-based technology company that tracks traffic volumes, has compiled data that confirms what the few drivers on the road are seeing. The company started seeing a sharp drop-off of traffic on March 14, several days after Michigan’s first coronavirus cases were reported. When Whitmer ordered restaurants and bars closed on March 16, that drop-off grew to 17.1% and when she signed an executive order for people to stay at home on March 23, traffic volumes dropped by 45.7% the next day.

The lack of rush hour traffic jams won't have an impact on how quickly a road project gets done, however. The I-75 project for example, has shifted traffic to the southbound lanes so the northbound lanes can be worked on without fear of cars whizzing past nearby workers.

## Are road construction workers really needed?

The Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association, which represents 500 Michigan road construction companies, asked Whitmer last week to deem road construction workers nonessential to protect workers from the spread of coronavirus.

“It doesn’t seem like all construction work is essential,” said Mike Nystrom, executive vice president of MITA.

Nystrom said the group appreciates the new guidelines from MDOT that address possible delays in construction projects if there are concerns about the coronavirus.

“This was a hard decision for us because these people are in the business to build stuff and employees are paid a good fair wage to build that stuff,” he said. “But we’re hoping the bottom line is that the safety and health of the employees comes first.”

## **Mild weather has some projects starting sooner**

The mild spring has prompted some agencies to get projects up and running even sooner than normal. In Oakland County, for example, a \$50 million road widening and improvement project on a 2-mile stretch of Baldwin Road in Orion Township is well underway.

“Certainly the health and safety of every person working on our projects is our top priority. But we think they can continue practicing social distancing and there typically is little or no interaction with the public on these projects,” said Craig Bryson, spokesman for the Road Commission of Oakland County. “It’s better to go ahead and get it done and continue the projects rather than risk losing federal funding or conflicting with projects on the schedule for next year. Right now, we think they are safe.”

Other projects in Oakland County that are scheduled to begin this spring:

- Repaving two stretches of 12 Mile Road between Coolidge and Greenfield in Berkley and Lahser and Telegraph and Southfield.

- Repaving a stretch of Dixboro Road between Eight and Nine Mile roads in South Lyon.

- Repaving Grange Hall Road from Holly Road north to the county line.

In Macomb County, upcoming road projects this spring and summer:

- Repair and repave 10 Mile, 14 Mile and 18 Mile roads between Dequindre and Ryan and 10 Mile Road from I-94 to Kelly.

- Repair and repave 21 Mile Road between Garfield and Schoenner and add a turn lane in front of the Kroger shopping center on 21 Mile and Card Road.

- Reconstruct 23 Mile Road from North Avenue to Card Road from a two-lane to a five lane highway.

- A complete reconstruction of Dequindre Road from West Utica to North Auburn Road.

- Repair and repave Garfield Road from M-59 to 18.5 Mile Road.

Wayne County couldn't be reached to get a list of 2020 road projects.

But one complicating factor, especially for future projects, is money.

“We’re looking at a future that is probably going to have less gas tax revenues in it,” Donohue said.