

Long-awaited widening of Route 22 begins Monday



Heavy Traffic on Route 22 on Friday afternoon. Shot from the Fullerton Street Bridge. /// NEWS - Allentown: Friday September 18, 2015 (Douglas Kilpatrick/Special to The Morning Call) mc-route22-widening-project-starting (DOUGLAS KILPATRICK / SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL)

By Matt Assad Of The Morning Call

If you're a driver who frequents the Lehigh Valley's busiest highway, you might want to file this under the category of Be Careful What You Wish For: The long-awaited widening of Route 22 begins Monday.

More than a decade after planners began lobbying for the \$1 billion needed to improve Route 22, construction crews will be on the highway to begin a five-year project to widen the road from MacArthur Road east to the Lehigh River.

The \$64.7 million project, which will stretch to November 2020, will ultimately replace three bridges and widen the highway from four lanes to six. PennDOT is requiring lane closings to come only at night, but planning officials warn that no project this big comes without pain.

If you're in one of the 90,000 vehicles that travels the highway every day, expect to snake through shifted, narrowed and reduced lanes.

"We won't allow lane restrictions during the day. That should minimize the delays," PennDOT spokesman Sean Brown said. "Any work that requires lane reductions will be done at night. That's part of the deal."

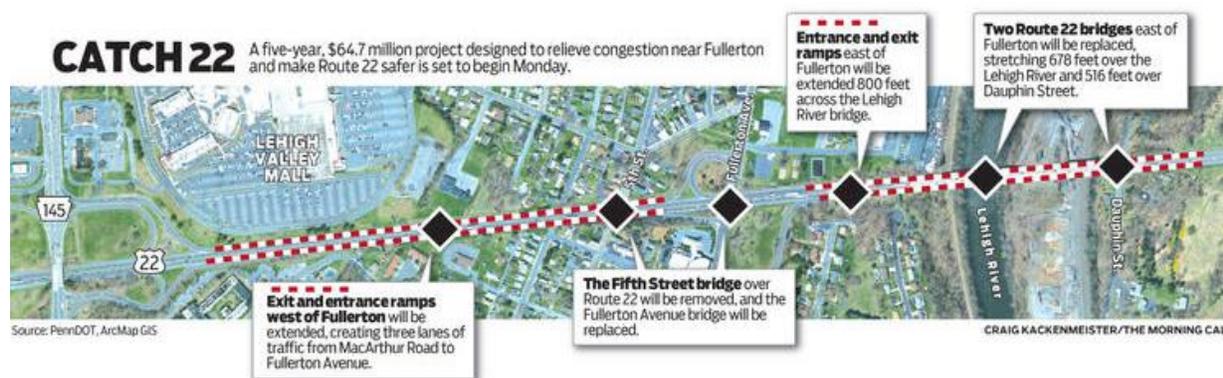
Wagman Heavy Civil Inc. of York was awarded the contract this month.

For more than a decade, Valley planners and municipal leaders have been lobbying for money to widen one of the state's most congested corridors from Easton to Interstate 78 in Upper Macungie Township. Just a few years ago, the project appeared to be dead because state officials deemed the \$1 billion price tag too big to fit into the budget.

However, when lawmakers approved a 28-cent gasoline tax hike that will be providing an additional \$2.3 billion a year in transportation money, the project was added to the Valley long-range plan last year.

It will be similar to the MacArthur Road interchange project that slowed traffic on Route 22 for much of the past two years, only bigger, costlier and longer. What motorists will see as early as Monday will be road crews cutting back roadside trees, moving utility poles along Route 22 and removing road medians along Fullerton Avenue.

Some road paving will be needed to accommodate lane shifts. It's prep work that will be done sporadically over the next three months — primarily at night — to get ready for the heavy construction due to begin in early 2016, Brown said.



"The prep work has to begin right away because any paving has to be completed by November," Brown said. "We generally don't pave in the winter months."

The major work will consist of replacing two Route 22 bridges in Whitehall Township just east of Fullerton, one spanning 678 feet across the Lehigh River and the other stretching 516 feet over Dauphin Street.

It's the most costly part of the project and the one likely to create the biggest traffic problems, but PennDOT officials said two lanes will be maintained in both directions. The lanes will be

narrowed and shifted as each bridge is replaced, a move that produced daily traffic jams during the \$13 million MacArthur Road project completed last year.

Fullerton Avenue bridge overpass across Route 22 also will be replaced, causing lane shifting and narrowing along Fullerton Avenue at the interchange. It will reduce the Fullerton bridge to one lane, likely going north, while southbound traffic will be detoured over the Fifth Street bridge. Once the new Fullerton bridge is in place, the Fifth Street bridge over Route 22 will be removed and likely won't be replaced until at least 2023.

All that might bring big traffic headaches to Whitehall residents, but Mayor Ed Hozza Jr. isn't complaining.

"I'm elated that this is finally starting," Hozza said. "Have you walked across the Fullerton bridge lately? You can practically see through the surface down onto [Route] 22. It's that deteriorated. This is long overdue."



CAPTION

Route 22 crosses the Lehigh River on this bridge at Fullerton. The Route 22 traffic headache is about to return with a \$70 million project to replace four bridges and fix the Fullerton interchange. Picture made on Wednesday, April 15, 2015. (DONNA FISHER / THE MORNING CALL)

The payoff for motorists will be the redesign of the Fullerton interchange, where short exit ramps require a driver to have plenty of engine — and nerve — to merge into traffic.

The new Fullerton exit lane heading west will be 2,000 feet long and extend all the way to MacArthur Road, giving motorists who now have perhaps 200 feet to accelerate onto the highway more than a quarter-mile. The exit will resemble the one on Route 22 that stretches between Route 378 and Airport Road, which allows drivers to go from one exit to the next without entering the highway's two westbound lanes.

The same will be true for the MacArthur Road eastbound exit, which would extend to Fullerton Avenue, essentially creating three lanes in each direction between the two exits.

At the same time, the eastbound Fullerton entrance onto Route 22 will be extended 800 feet across the new Route 22 bridge. That will double the distance motorists have to get onto the highway, while the eastbound exit ramp onto Fullerton Avenue also will be doubled to give motorists more than 800 feet to exit the highway into Fullerton.

The result of the five-year project will be a Route 22 that is six lanes wide from MacArthur Road to the Lehigh River bridge.

What's starting now is a precursor to the next phase of widening, expected to cost more than \$200 million, that will expand Route 22 to six lanes from Airport Road to 15th Street in Allentown.

"We've gotten through Route 22 construction before, we'll get through this," Hozza said. "It has to be done."