



# GETTING CLOSER

## Louisiana charging on with Interstate-49 work



Staff photo by Evan Lewis

■ A dump truck hauls loads of dirt from a worksite on Louisiana's Black Bayou levy in late November. The state's transportation department has faced numerous challenges in constructing Interstate 49 from Arkansas to Shreveport, La., including crossing several levees and oil wells.

By BRANDY S. CHEWNING ■ Texarkana Gazette

**B**LANCHARD, La.—Miles of perfectly paved interstate stretch through the Louisiana countryside, a scene made eerie by the complete lack of cars.

But that will likely change in just a few months as portions of Interstate 49 between the Arkansas state line and Shreveport, La., are expected to open.

I-49 will stretch 36.25 miles from Arkansas to Interstate 220 in Shreveport. From there I-49 is complete south to Lafayette.

Greg Wall, area engineer for the Louisiana Department of Transportation & Development, believes some of the local I-49 will be open in 2012.

About half the 36 miles is paved and the other half is undergoing early work like utilities relocation and dirt-work.

The final 5 miles north of Shreveport are all that is not under a DOTD construction contract, and funding is pending via an unclaimed property bond. The route in Shreveport has not been selected but is narrowed to a handful of designs.

The highway is being constructed through a combination of state, federal, bond and metropolitan planning funds.

Cost of the 36-mile stretch was originally estimated at \$350 million. Now it's inflated to more than \$600 million.

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## I-49

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tion. "It's almost doubled," Hall said. "The last 3-mile stretch between Interstate 20 and Interstate 220 is like \$850 million. It ain't cheap."

But unlike Arkansas, the fount of transportation funds still appears to flow in Louisiana.

"They are still putting projects out in Baton Rouge (Louisiana DOTD's home office). Money is still coming in, now I don't know how long it's going to last," Hall said.

In the race to the state line Louisiana won. That state's work extends a few feet into Arkansas where it awaits the northern connection. Work on the Arkansas portion of the project is visible from the Louisiana piece.

But I-49 has had its share of challenges, from crossing levees to plugging oil wells. Some wells that had to be capped dated to the early 1900s and several hundred belonged to a single oil company.

The heavy equipment traffic related to the work has also damaged some state roads.

"The old roads don't have a whole lot of structure in them," Hall said. "We've had some of our roadways that have gone back to gravel because of the repetitive nature of the trucks."

It's something else to be fixed before the entire project is complete.

Beautification is also in the plans. Shortly after southbound motorists cross into Louisiana on I-49 they will be greeted by a Louisiana-shaped bed of daffodils planted on a hill.

During a November visit small flags whipped in the breeze,

already outlining the state's shape, and daffodil bulbs had been purchased and retrieved from Mississippi.

The highway is also designed for safer travel in the winter. Where possible, I-49 in Louisiana stays on the ground and intersecting roads have overpasses.

"Typically when we have the major snow and ice events it hits Caddo Parish and Bossier Parish, so we don't like bridges," Hall said.

Louisiana is in the throes of a movie movement and has become a popular filming loca-

tion, Hall said the trend often touches the DOTD, and has even come to I-49.

Where the southern piece is waiting for its northern connection, I-49 was a set for this year's "Bottle Los Angeles."

"On Interstate 49 over I-20 is where it winds up ending so there's not a lot of people that go that way. The city and the movie company came to the department and asked about shutting it down," Hall said.

The area was shut down for a month for filming.

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