



Thursday, Jan. 29, 2009

Parkway project to UC Merced campus gets going next month

The first phase, from Highway 99 to Childs Avenue, should be completed in November.

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Construction on Campus Parkway, the long-awaited expressway that will eventually connect Highway 99 to UC Merced, is slated to begin next month.

In the works for more than a decade, the four-lane, \$110 million expressway has been billed as vital to UC Merced's success. Officials say it will play a big role in preventing congestion on Merced's roads as the campus, which opened in 2005, continues to grow.

UC Merced now serves roughly 2,700 undergraduates, but that's projected to jump to 25,000 in the coming decades.

Crews are set to begin work on the first phase of the four-mile-long expressway in mid- or late February, said Steve Rough, a supervising traffic engineer for Merced County.

That phase will extend from the Mission Avenue interchange at Highway 99 to Childs Avenue, and it's slated for completion by November, Rough said.

The rest will be built in two more phases -- one stretching from Childs Avenue to Highway 140 and the other from 140 to Yosemite Avenue.

A timeline for those phases depends on funding, Rough said.

So far the county has gathered enough state money to pay only for the first phase. The Board of Supervisors recently awarded that contract, for \$5.6 million, to Sacramento-based Teichert Construction.

Officials hope a combination of state and federal tax dollars will pay for the rest.

"We're really excited to finally be at this point in the process," Rough said. "We've been working a long time to get here."

To build the entire expressway, the county will have to acquire about 160 acres of land from 15 owners. Those landowners were first notified in 1998 that they'd probably have to make way for the new road.

So far, the county has successfully negotiated land sales for all the property it will need for the first phase, avoiding claims of eminent domain.

Rough estimated it will take another year to acquire land for phases II and III.

The expressway project earned its final go-ahead to break ground from the Federal Highway Administration in May 2007.

"Obviously, this is an integral part of an overall transportation plan for the area," county spokeswoman Katie Albertson said. "This isn't just important for the county, but for the city and the UC as well. A lot of folks have put a lot of time in on this."

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SunStar photo by George MacDonald If all goes according to plan, future drivers on Campus Parkway will have a third direction choice by year's end: Straight ahead. The project linking UC Merced with Highway 99 is expected to start next month.

