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# 10 transportation projects in the Des Moines metro's future

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Construction of extra lanes along I-35 south of the west mixmaster Nov. 26 in West Des Moines. / Rodney White/The Register

Written by **Perry Beeman**

A business-friendly spate of Des Moines transportation projects now under way is a prelude to billions of dollars worth of projects planned over the next several decades.

It might be the biggest collection of advances in getting people from place to place since the \$430 million reconstruction of 14-mile Interstate Highway 235 from 2001 to 2007.

Young professionals told city leaders they wanted better transit service, and the Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority, or DART, answered with new routes and a shiny, new, warm downtown terminal, both getting a first full workout this week.

The airport's \$4 million overhaul of its 1948 terminal came as passengers pushed business travel toward a new record and helped draw Southwest Airlines, a goal for three decades.

Several major highway projects just completed or under way are a prelude to a string of projects worth billions

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The new Ankeny interchange is open for drivers at Northeast 36th Street. / Mary Chind/The Register

of dollars planned through 2035.

Long-range plans call for \$5 billion in new roads and improvements through 2035, covering 436 miles, the Des Moines Metropolitan Planning Organization reported recently in its Tomorrow Plan.

It all feeds into talk of an economic development boom that leaders hope will feature a high-tech business corridor running through central Iowa and including Ames and Des Moines, part of the Capital Crossroads area planning effort.

"The value of all those projects collectively can not be overstated," said Gene Meyer, former West Des Moines mayor and current president of the chamber group Greater Des Moines Partnership. "They are absolutely paramount and critical to expansion in Des Moines and the rest of central Iowa. The thing we need to be proud of is this has resulted from a great deal of excellent planning."

Among the highlights:

- DART unveiled its \$22 million Central Station, an environmentally friendly and climate-controlled terminal feeding riders onto revamped bus routes. Now in their first full week of operation, the new routes make it easier for riders to get to the area's regional shopping malls, boost service in low-income areas, and make it possible to get to many places without first passing through downtown. There is talk of train-like rapid bus service — in which buses would make fewer stops and have limited control over traffic signals — and shuttles, van pools or train service between Ames and Des Moines.

- The Des Moines airport's terminal overhaul, which took three years, is intended to bide time until a new terminal is built. That could come within a decade, said airport executive director Don Smitley. Southwest Airlines' arrival fed an already strong surge in



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passengers, up 8.4 percent this year through the end of October. The airport stands to top 10 million boardings this year for the first time.

Parking facilities are expanding, too.

• A new Interstate Highway 35 interchange at Ankeny opened last week, and a Martin Luther King Parkway extension to U.S. Highway 65, called the Southeast Connector, is planned and under construction.

• The Iowa Department of Transportation is expanding I-35 to six lanes from Interstate Highway 80 south to the Iowa Highway 5 area in West Des Moines, for \$100 million.

• Long-range proposals call for a beltway around the entire metro area, with new loops in the southwest, northwest and northeast sections of the metro area, tying into the U.S. Highway 65-Iowa Highway 5 beltway and Iowa Highway 141. One possible route would run from I-80 near Adventureland north to the Elkhart and Ankeny areas, across U.S. Highway 69 to the Mile Long Bridge, where it could meet up with a proposed western beltway.

• Suburban leaders plan by 2014 to open an I-80 interchange at Alice's Road in Waukee, a major north-south route that connects the heavily traveled and developed Hickman Road and University Avenue. The 1,700 acres along the route would be a mix of residential, office, retail and open space and would create 20,000 to 25,000 jobs and 7,700 homes, according to a planning report.

Meyer noted that Ankeny has gained Interstate Highway 35 interchanges at Corporate Woods Drive and 36th Street in recent years, and West Des Moines' I-35 exit at Mills Civic Parkway feeds into the booming Jordan Creek Mall and West Glen commercial areas.

"These are big, big deals," Meyer said. "People often see them in isolation, but they really add up. We often brag about our commute times and how easy it is to get

around the area."

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Smithey, the airport director, has seen the importance of a strong airport in luring business before. When he ran the Omaha airport before moving to West Des Moines, he used the ease of getting flights to help lure Google's server farms to Council Bluffs and PayPal's operations center to Omaha.

"Air transportation is critical to economic development," Smithey said. "You have to be able to get people in and out of town. You can Skype for only so long, then you need to get in front of people."

The construction projects and mass transit improvements are important to the mix of ways to get around, said DART board chairwoman Angela Connolly, even though the Census Bureau's American Community Survey found that 81.5 percent of residents in Polk, Dallas and Warren counties typically traveled alone by personal vehicle. The average trip took 25 minutes and covered 15 miles.

Just 5 percent of local families don't own an automobile, so it's no surprise that just 10 percent joined carpools and 1.5 percent rode the bus, according to the Census. More Des Moines-area residents walked to work than rode public transit. Another 3.9 percent worked at home.

DART General Manager Elizabeth Presutti said the new routes should continue to encourage a trend toward higher bus ridership fueled recently by high gas prices and a dicey economy. She added that expanding the regional offerings, including van pools, will help Des Moines avoid the gridlock of Atlanta, Los Angeles and other major markets.

And, it's good for business.

"Young professionals told us they want mountains and oceans and transit," and the first two attractions on that list are out of the question without some unexpected help from Mother Nature, Presutti said. "You have to think about the choices. There is no doubt a place for roads, but we need to do it responsibly and in conjunction with other modes."

"Other modes" includes bikes, buses, van pools and walking.

Connolly, the DART board chairwoman and also a Polk County supervisor, agreed a combination of road projects and mass transit are needed. "Both through Capital Crossroads and the Tomorrow Plan, we recognize the regional plan for more investment, particularly in mass transit. You can't continue to build these interchanges and roads because they are expensive and not everyone is going to drive alone. We do need investments in mass transit."

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