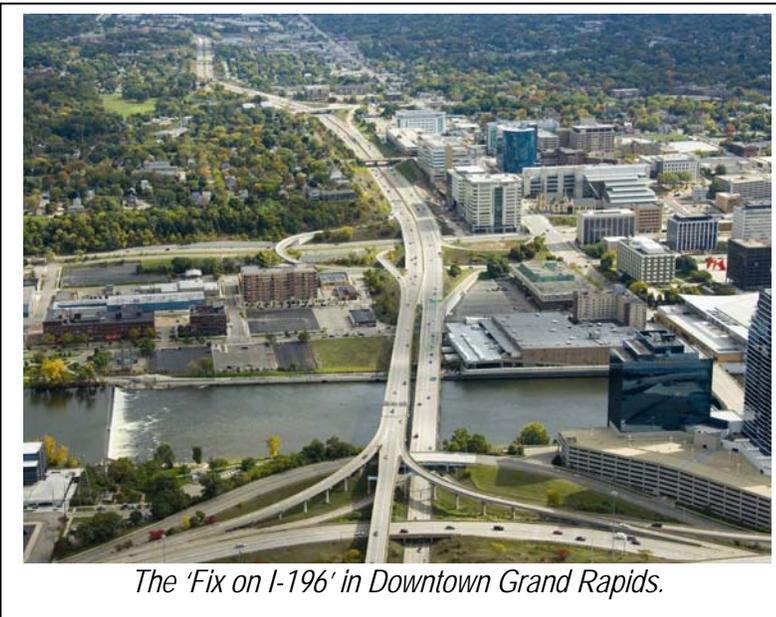


The “Fix on I-196” Project Overview – Grand Rapids, Michigan

The Michigan Department of Transportation completed the **Fix on I-196** in 2010 to reconstruct a portion of the Gerald R. Ford Freeway (I-196) just east of downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan. Originally constructed nearly 50 years ago, the freeway pavement and bridges required replacement and upgrading in order to continue to serve as the principal gateway to the second largest metropolitan area in Michigan. The corridor had an average daily traffic volume of 72,100 vehicles per day in 2008 and is projected to serve 95,500 vehicles per day by 2028. The existing facility did not have the capacity to meet anticipated traffic volumes, was incurring high maintenance costs as the pavement had exceeded its design life, and had numerous features which do not meet current AASHTO design standards.

The area adjacent to the freeway, known locally as the Medical Mile, includes the largest hospital in western Michigan,



The 'Fix on I-196' in Downtown Grand Rapids.

Spectrum Butterworth, and also is home to recent developments including the Lemmen-Holton Cancer Pavilion, the Van Andel Research Institute, Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, Fred and Lena Meijer Heart Center, and the new Michigan State University Medical School. These state of the art facilities are transforming the area into a nationally recognized center for medical treatment, research, and education, and are key components for the continuing transformation of the “Furniture City” into a modern, economically diverse Grand Rapids. Improving I-196 was essential for the continued revitalization and growth of the region.

In cooperation with the City of Grand Rapids, an environmental assessment was prepared which identified the needed improvements. The improvements which resulted from this planning effort include this project, the replacement of the College Avenue overcrossing in 2008, and the

replacement of the overcrossing and two ramps at the I-196/Fuller Interchange in 2011.

An additional through lane in each direction, weave/merge lanes, wider shoulders, and improved ramp geometry were needed in order to update the freeway to current standards and provide the desired level of service. Improving ride quality and lowering future maintenance costs for the facility were also important goals. Completing the work on schedule and with the overall best value for the taxpayer dollars is also always important.

The Michigan Department of Transportation used an extensive stakeholder involvement plan for this project that included a diverse group of local government officials, business leaders and neighborhood groups. In addition to the principal project goal of providing a facility which could safely accommodate anticipated traffic into the future, the stakeholders identified the following additional specific goals for the project:

- **Non-Motorized Access**
- **Aesthetics**
- **Traffic Impacts during Construction**
- **Minimizing Environmental Impacts**

The project goals were explicit, clear and measurable. This provided a clear vision of the project that was then followed throughout the design and construction phases.

The customers for the Fix on I-196 included the roadway users and the entire Grand Rapids community, represented by the City of Grand Rapids, Spectrum Health, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids Community College, the Belknap Neighborhood Association, Heritage Hill Neighborhood Association, and various business groups. Affected public and private utilities and local television, radio and newspapers were also identified as stakeholders for the project.

MDOT arranged over 100 meetings with the various stakeholders and the public during the course of the project and actively solicited their input in setting project goals and priorities, and resolving issues as they arose. By including a diverse group in the decision making process and by proactively enlisting their assistance in helping to make the project a success, a high level of support for the project was developed in the stakeholders. This in turn resulted in acceptance and enthusiasm for the project by the entire community. Local media coverage of the project was very positive throughout and proved very helpful for the success of the project.

Public support is essential for a project of this type to be considered a success. In addition to meetings with stakeholders, the project included a plan for communication with the general public to explain what the project included, why it was being done, how it was being done, how they would be affected personally, and how they would benefit from the project.

To help explain the project concept and objectives, a video was created and made available on Youtube <http://www.youtube.com/MichiganDOT#p/u/3/JdQ41ScfuKg>. The video has received over 25,000 hits and features an animated drive through of the project area before and after construction to highlight the benefits provided by the additional lanes, wider shoulders, and ramp improvements. Aesthetic improvements planned were also included in the video. Local business and government leaders were also featured to explain the project and its benefits.

Inconvenience due to construction activities was a primary concern with the project. Numerous options for constructing the project, including part width and a full closure, were developed. A consensus formed that a complete closure of the freeway and having the work done in a single season was preferable to a multiyear project with traffic travelling through the work zone.

Closure of the freeway required thousands of travelers to find alternate routes to access downtown Grand Rapids and the Medical Mile area. Access to area businesses and particularly to the hospitals adjacent to the project had to be maintained. Communication with the public regarding construction activities and access was crucial to minimizing these impacts. Local television, radio, and newspaper stakeholders were called upon to help in providing information regarding the freeway, ramp, and lane closures.

The Fix on I-196 also had its own Facebook Page and Twitter Account (with over 6000 followers) to provide up to the minute information and status regarding closures and alternate routes. Existing Intelligent Transportation System message boards, along with temporary changeable message signs included in the project construction contract, were also used to provide real time travel time information to help motorists to determine the best alternate route based upon current conditions. MDOT's website also included detailed information and dates regarding alternating the freeway and ramp closures.

Another concern for the project was landscaping, and extensive use of aesthetic treatments for the bridges and walls were identified by the stakeholders as important items for the project and incorporated into the design. The lack of sidewalks across the freeway on the old bridges was cited as a major deficiency with the existing facility that needed to be addressed as well. All of the new bridges include 10 foot to 12 foot wide sidewalks. A 14 foot wide non-motorized path was included under the Lafayette structure to improve pedestrian and bicycle traffic. This facility is shown in the City Long Range Plan and will be extended in the future.

Teamwork was essential in completing this project on time and on budget. Since I-196 is one of the key access points to Downtown Grand Rapids, as well as serving the Michigan Street Corridor, a parallel route which has become known as the Medical Mile due to the significant number of medical facilities and research centers along the corridor.

MDOT engaged many of stakeholders with this project. Initial engagement is critical, but continuous engagement with all levels of customers was the difference between a good project outcome and a great project outcome.

"A project of this magnitude creates a positive ripple effect for employment and the economy," said Jeanne Englehart, former president & CEO of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce. "Not just in the jobs it creates immediately, but through the long-term benefits of a beautiful new gateway to our downtown and the type of infrastructure we need to position Grand Rapids for future growth."



Renderings were developed in the planning/design phase for aesthetic improvements to the corridor.



During the numerous stakeholder meetings, the adjacent Neighborhood Associations helped define the proposed sidewalk width across bridges. Shown here, the Coit Bridge includes 12-foot wide sidewalks and pavilion areas.