

Construction underway on the '\$30 million mile'

MnDOT's latest Duluth project eliminates a six-intersection bottleneck but will inconvenience drivers for 18 months.

By Pamela Rust

State budget cuts prompted the recent Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) announcement that it likely will cut about 50 percent of scheduled 2003 highway improvement projects.

The agency jokes on its website: "Here in Minnesota there are two seasons, winter and road construction." It may have to change its tune.

The reduction doesn't bode well for local highway and heavy contractors. But Burnsville, MN-based contractor Ames Construction isn't feeling any pain right now. Its portion of the new U.S. Highway 53/Piedmont Avenue reconstruction in Duluth is \$25 million.

"We've started working on the Fifth Street bridge excavation," said Jesse Wilcox, Ames' on-site project manager. "We've also started blasting out rock for retaining walls at the south end."

The 1.25-mile upgrade of U.S. Highway 53, also known as Piedmont Avenue, from Fourth Street to a quarter mile past Skyline Drive, has a \$30 million price tag.

For the next 18 months, many Duluth motorists will use alternate routes. The highway branches off Interstate 35 at 21st Avenue West and is a major route winding north to Miller Hill Mall and Hermantown.

Roberta Dwyer, MnDOT's construction project manager, said traffic should resume

on the roadway in October 2004, with final clean-up and landscaping completed in August 2005.

The project was funded through a one-time \$459 million MnDOT appropriation by the 2000 state legislature that accelerated numerous road and bridge improvement projects.

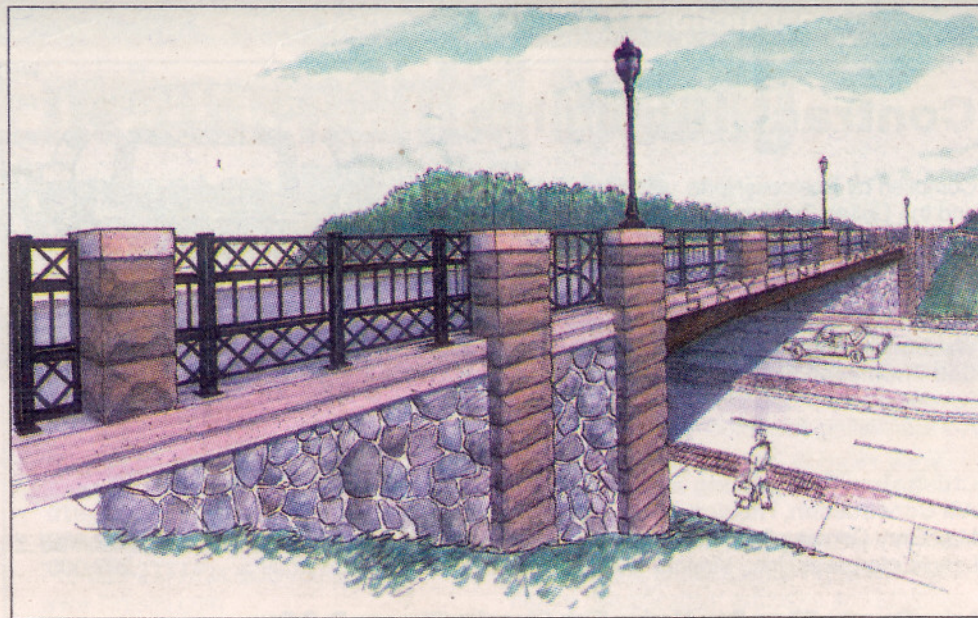
Ames was low bidder for the job, beating Northland Constructors of Duluth, Edward Kraemer & Sons of Plain, WI, and Johnson Brothers, a national firm. Ames ranked No. 113 among the top 400 U.S. construction companies, according to *Engineering News-Record*.

"Last year, we completed \$480 million worth of work," said Wilcox. "We're right back on track this year as well."

In 2001, LHB Engineers & Architects' Duluth office teamed with Minneapolis-based BRW (purchased recently by URS) in a 50-50 split to design the expansion. LHB's portion, which took more than a year to complete, generated about \$580,000 in revenue, said LHB project manager Tom Pfeffer.

That work included lighting design, landscaping, underground utilities, retaining walls and two bridges. BRW focused on roadways and traffic signals, and designed the other two bridges, he said.

MnDOT district engineer Mike Robinson said plans for that intersection have been in place for 44 years.



architectural rendering courtesy of Minnesota Department of Transportation

The rendering above illustrates the new bridge on Highway 53 (Piedmont Avenue) that will span Skyline Drive in Duluth. It was designed by URS (formerly BRW) and Duluth-based LHB Architects & Engineers. Pedestrian walkways under the bridge are another new feature.

In the early 1980s, truckers complained of losing brakes, he said. In the mid-1990s, MnDOT purchased and razed 70 homes and businesses along the roadway, in anticipation of the project. Then it was shelved, he said.

In this second round, MnDOT purchased 19 homes and three businesses to make additional space for the expansion.

Changes to the roadway include:

- addition of 8-foot wide shoulders, sidewalks and landscaping.
- width increase to four lanes, with new left turn lanes.
- sharp curves will be straightened and the six-point intersection removed.
- new retaining walls as well as a pedestrian concourse under the highway.
- four new bridges: linking the east and west sides of Piedmont Avenue between Fourth and Fifth streets, one under Skyline Parkway and one over Miller Creek.

With the one-time \$459 million

MnDOT allocation expiring statewide by June, additional funds are needed.

In April, Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Lt. Gov. Carol Molnau proposed a \$1.0-\$1.2 billion transportation financing package to accelerate critical highway and bridge improvement projects.

MnDOT's Robinson said the Legislature hasn't approved the funding and specific projects have not been identified.

Meanwhile, Ames is moving full steam ahead.

"Our plan is to start at Fourth Street, at the bottom, and march our way up the hill. Our goal this year is to get up to Ninth Street, and have roads covered with gravel, ready for concrete paving next summer," said construction manager Wilcox.

"Depending on the weather, we might even continue into winter, working on the Miller Creek bridge," he said.