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OTA breaks ground on \$48M I-44/Turner Turnpike bridge project in Wellston

The Oklahoma Turnpike Authority took another step toward widening the I-44/Turner Turnpike to six lanes between Oklahoma City and Tulsa with a groundbreaking Tuesday afternoon in Wellston for a bridge reconstruction project. Widening the corridor through a series of projects is a highlight of the ACCESS Oklahoma long-range plan.

Joining OTA Executive Director Joe Echelle were Oklahoma Lt. Gov. Matt Pinnell, Oklahoma Department of Transportation Director Tim Gatz and Wellston Mayor Paul Whitnah to celebrate the start later this month of a \$48 million bridge reconstruction. The nearly 71-year-old I-44/Turner Turnpike bridge over SH-66 in Wellston will be replaced and widened to six lanes with construction expected to complete in summer 2025.

"This is an exciting day for the entire state of Oklahoma," Lt. Gov. Pinnell said Tuesday. "We're off the most famous road in the entire world and it is such an economic driver for the state of Oklahoma. Over half of all sales tax collected in Oklahoma is off the Route 66 road. It's that much more important for our transportation department and turnpike authority to be partnering together to make sure that we can make that safe and make it a very good experience for our tourists and, yes, absolutely for the 4 million people who live right here in Oklahoma."

Pinnell said he appreciated the partnership between the two transportation agencies as they work to ensure that historic preservation and safety needs are met on projects that impact Route 66.

The ACCESS Oklahoma long-range plan has a commitment by the Turnpike Authority to widen the entire 90 miles of the I-44/Turner Turnpike to six lanes, Echelle said, and this 1-mile project is one component of that corridor improvement.

Other key aspects of the project, awarded in September 2023 to Sherwood Construction Co. of Tulsa, include:

- I-44/Turner Turnpike traffic will remain open to two lanes in each direction throughout the duration of the just more than one-year-long project. However, by late summer turnpike traffic will be shifted onto a temporary detour that will cross SH-66 at ground level. This means that SH-66 will be closed to thru-traffic between US-177 and SH-102 for up to a year to accommodate the temporary detour.
- A new westbound I-44/Turner Turnpike off-ramp will be constructed, moving the ramp slightly to the west of its current location. Motorists can expect the on- and off-ramps to SH-66 to generally remain open during the project but may be intermittently narrowed.
- SH-66 will be constructed to accommodate future widening to four lanes and will feature 6-foot sidewalks underneath the new bridge.
- The nearby commuter parking lot will be moved to the east and reconstructed to improve access from SH-66 and improve safety for commuters.
- Local motorists needing to access SH-66 between US-177 and SH-102 will have a signed detour while those exiting I-44/Turner Turnpike will detour to US-177 to US-62 to SH-102 to SH-66. (See map graphic below.)
- The completed bridge will have four retaining walls that will feature Route 66-themed artwork through a partnership with the Oklahoma Arts Council.
- More than 31,000 vehicles travel this section of the I-44/Turner Turnpike daily, on average. It's estimated that more than 55,000 vehicles per day could travel this section by 2053.

ODOT Director Gatz highlighted the importance of Route 66 in transportation and that ODOT is making a more than \$100 million investment in the historic highway corridor between Edmond and Wellston. ODOT is contributing \$7.5 million to OTA's project in Wellston due to the construction that will take place on SH-66.

"The one thing I can ensure you of that at this handshake location between the tax-supported state highway location and the turnpike network, on this particular location on Route 66 we will make you proud of what it becomes," Gatz said. "We're going to do that for the community and we're committed with a quality group of individuals and companies who are going to bring this to fruition."

This project will be completed ahead of the Route 66 Centennial celebration in 2026.

Mayor Whitnah said his community is prepared for the disruption to SH-66 travel and looks forward to the new opportunities the project will bring to Wellston.

"It's a very exciting time for Wellston history," Whitnah said. "At this point I now understand how the townspeople felt in 1926 when Route 66 came through Wellston. It was a thriving farming community. ... Wellston has always had a bright future due to our location. This will help us move forward and grow like we need to."

Echelle also announced that the I-44/Turner Turnpike will convert to cashless tolling May 1, meaning all motorists will continue traveling and pay their tolls online at their convenience after their trip. There will be no change for PIKEPASS customers, who will be billed as normal. Cash toll booths will be removed by later this year and cash customers can keep moving and expect an invoice to be mailed to them through OTA's PlatePay system.

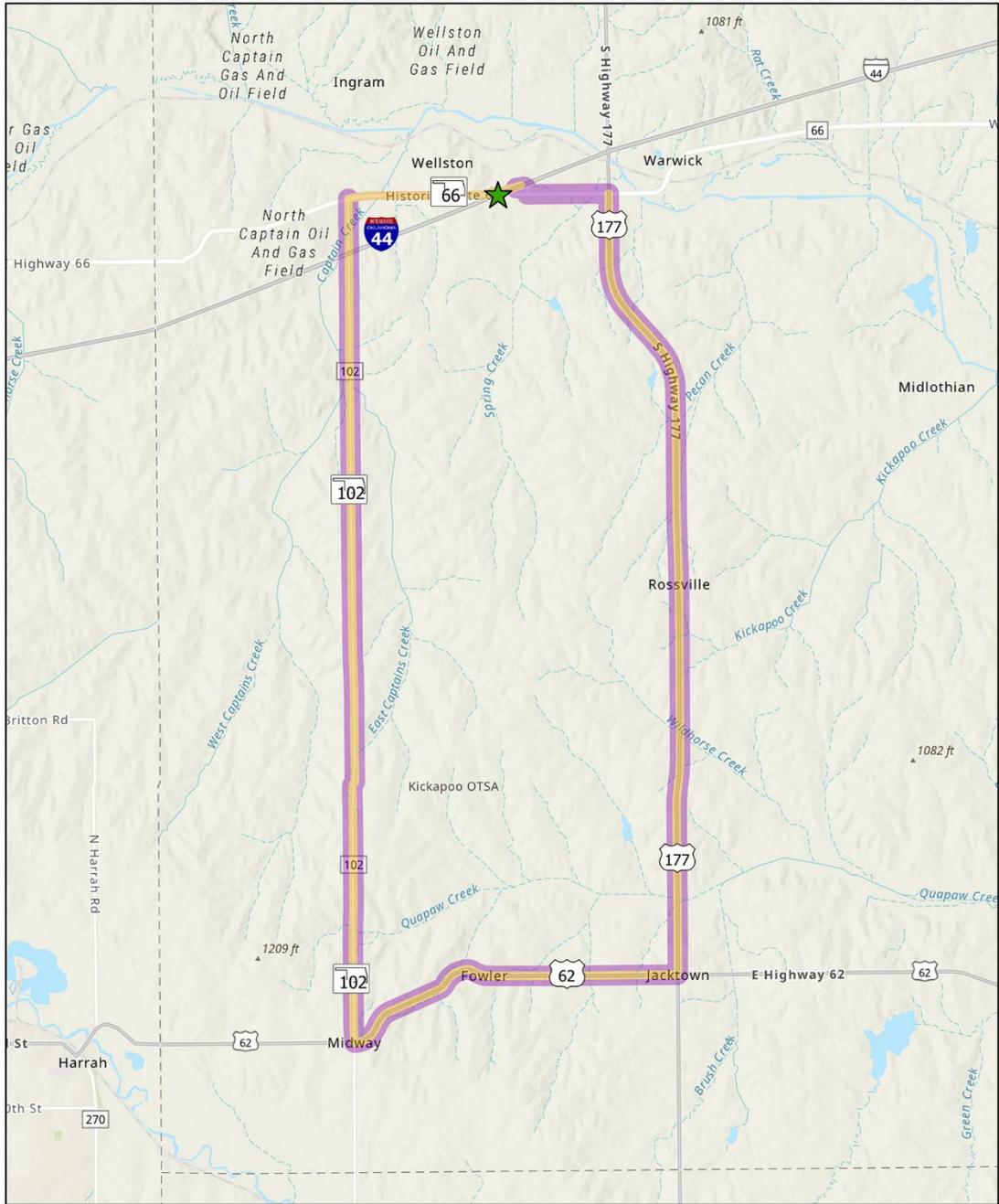
"Part of cashless tolling has been a door opener for us to be able to put interchanges where they best facilitate the communities that we serve here in the state like Wellston, Davenport, Depew, Chandler, Stroud and I can go on," OTA Executive Director Joe Echelle said. "We're adding dozens of interchanges across the state as part of ACCESS Oklahoma."

OTA's cashless conversion is about the safety of the traveling public as it eliminates the need for motorists to slow down, pull over to pay tolls then speed back up to re-enter mainline traffic. These actions often served as conflict points for traffic, which led to about 500 crashes in toll zones in the six years prior to OTA beginning open road tolling.

Stay up to date on project information at www.accessoklahoma.com or learn more about PlatePay and cashless tolling at www.platepay.com.



State and local dignitaries including Lt. Gov. Matt Pinnell, Wellston Mayor Paul Whitnah, OTA Executive Director Joe Echelle and ODOT Executive Director Tim Gatz and OTA Board members John Jones and Todd Cone broke ground Tuesday on a \$48 million bridge reconstruction project on the I-44/Turner Turnpike over SH-66 in Wellston.



SH-66 Closure Detour at I-44 / Turner Turnpike at Wellston

-  Bridge Project Location
-  Eastbound Detour Route
- Westbound Detour Route



Starting by later summer 2024, local motorists needing to access SH-66 between US-177 and SH-102 will have a signed detour while those exiting I-44/Turner Turnpike who want to reach the west side of SH-66 will detour to US-177 to US-62 to SH-102 to SH-66.