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Mysteries of I-74 revealed

Arches and tunnels turn heads as reconstruction gathers steam

January 12, 2004

In relation to the magnitude of the Interstate 74 overhaul, it's a minor detail, albeit one that probably has thousands of motorists scratching their heads.

A series of concrete arches has been erected in the I-74 median between the Sheridan Road and University Street overpasses in Peoria.

Shrouded in insulation materials and scaffolding, the structures resemble a gateway or portal set amid a background of overturned earth.

The function is less mysterious than the appearance: to support a new overpass. The design was necessitated by environmental factors, according to George Ryan, Illinois Department of Transportation implementation engineer for the I-74 project.

The bridge spans Dry Run Creek, the concrete drainage ditch running down the center of the interstate median. Engineers could have implemented a rectangular design to cross the culvert but instead chose the arch to match historic building motifs in the vicinity.

"We decided we didn't want to go with something that looked like a big old box," Ryan said.

When the University Street overpass is torn out starting in April, those center piers also will be rebuilt with arched replacements. University will be reduced to one lane in either direction until November, when that bridge is scheduled to be finished.

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Another project peculiarity, though one less visible than the arched piers, rests underground near OSF Saint Francis Medical Center.

Drivers who braved the barricades on Berkeley Avenue may have noticed a seemingly misplaced concrete slab between Berkeley and the interstate.

It's actually the top of a section of tunnel that eventually will carry cars from Knoxville onto westbound I-74.

"It's built in stages to allow traffic to move in and around the area as we move through the rest of the project," Ryan explained.

The less than 100-foot segment has been filled in and covered with dirt. A temporary road will be built over the tunnel, then ripped out during a later contract. At that time, the pre-built section of tunnel will be excavated and the remainder of the 300-foot structure finished. It is scheduled to open when the project is completed at the end of 2006.

Ryan said the building practice is uncommon but necessary to keep emergency vehicle routes to the hospital open throughout the reconstruction period.

Yet despite that kind of long-term planning, engineers must remain flexible on day-to-day operations. Not all crucial maneuvers are as noticeable as others. Construction crews spread closer to the heart of Downtown last week when work resumed after a two-week holiday hiatus. Lane reductions on Fayette Street between Glendale Avenue and Adams Street backed up interstate traffic at the eastbound Glendale exit.

Altering the traffic light cycle at the exit failed to eliminate the problem, so IDOT closed Fayette between Knoxville and Glendale and shut down traffic regulation, giving inbound Downtown commuters unfettered access to Fayette and Glendale.

"Whenever you're working in an urban environment like that, you always run into something you never could have known about," Ryan said.

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