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## Midland officials hail Meridian Road connector

CATHY HENG/THE SAGINAW NEWS

SANFORD -- The long and winding road to a shorter and straighter path on Meridian Road in Midland County is coming to an end.

State, county, city and township officials were on hand Wednesday for the start of a \$6.4 million project near Sanford that includes an 1,170-foot-long bridge over the Tittabawasee River and a mile of new road from Saginaw Road south to West Wackerly.

Officials say crews from contractor Milbocker and Sons of Allegan expect to complete the Meridian Road connector, in the works since 1998, by November 2008.

Design Engineer Jennifer Dougherty of Scott Civil Engineering Co. of Grand Rapids said the pre-stressed concrete bridge includes nine spans with two lanes and eight-foot shoulders. The bridge is 43.5 feet wide.

"This bridge created a unique design challenge since it had to go through the flood plain," Dougherty said. "The area is flat in the plain, but steep at the edges. The job was to create the least fill while still keeping the cost as low as possible."

While the bridge has nine spans, only three of them are over water. Dougherty said the others are over the flood plain. Crews will face the custom designed railing with Michigan natural fieldstone. A Pere Marquette rail trail tunnel will continue near the bridge.

"This bridge will help the area and people will enjoy using it for generations," Dougherty said.

Transportation officials say the Meridian or M-30 connector will reduce travel time, increase safety response time in the county, provide an alternate truck route and increase tourism.

"This happened only because of local visionary groups trying to help themselves, pick themselves up by the bootstraps and solve their own problems," said Larry Tibbits, chief operations officer for Michigan Department of Transportation.

He said funding for the project came from "nine different pots over three fiscal years and was not for the faint of heart."

It involved state, federal, and local road funds that U.S. Rep. Dave Camp, a Midland Republican, helped to obtain, Tibbits said.

"Many people have worked on this project for years," Camp said at the groundbreaking ceremony Wednesday. "This makes our state better economically -- allowing people to get from point A to point B. This makes life better and benefits the region. I can't wait to drive it."

The speakers all credited Midland Road Commission Manager Deepak Gupta for making the Meridian connector possible.

"It was Deepak who pulled the dollars and cents together," Road Commission Chairman Eugene R. Smith said.