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For immediate release

## Rice County Highway Department rolls into 2022 after a busy 2021

The project expected to be the largest in 2021 could get back in gear by early 2022, but first Rice County needs a district court judge to agree that repairs to 2.3 miles of Baseline Road are in the public's interest.

The work was set to begin in spring 2020, but even as bids came in, the county wasn't able to secure needed right of way from a handful of property

owners. At the time, the courts were shut down due to COVID-19, so the Rice County Board of Commissioners rejected bids and hoped to start anew this year.

The county, which has since come to terms with all but two landowners, will be in court Dec. 28 to ask the judge to allow the project to move forward. If the judge agrees, property negotiations can continue while construction proceeds.

The project will pave the gravel road from County Road 1 south to County Road 8 north of Faribault, widen and grade the roadway, improve drainage and flatten a troublesome hill, according to County Engineer Dennis Luebbe. When complete, the road, designated in the county's 10-year plan as an east frontage road for Interstate 35, will support 10-ton vehicles.

The completion of this segment will provide a continuous paved frontage road from the County Road 1 / I-35 interchange into Faribault's Industrial Park.

While it's as yet unclear when the judge might rule on the project, Luebbe hopes to hear by February. That would allow the county to maintain a typical timeline: advertise for bids in March and work beginning in May.

The county completed five bridge projects in 2021, four of them in Richland Township. A fifth bridge project was postponed until the Baseline Road project gets underway. The county Highway Department plans to use a box culvert salvaged from that project to complete work on a County Road 90 bridge.



*A new eight-bay warm storage addition was built onto the 1975 Rice County Highway Shop in Faribault as part of a \$3.77 million 2020 addition/remodeling project. (Rice County photo)*

In all, the county spent \$1.48 million on the bridges in 2022. About \$281,000 came from county sales tax; \$93,000 came from Town Bridge funds. Most of the balance -- \$812,300 -- came from state bridge bonding dollars awarded on a first come, first served basis.

The county also spent \$475,000 on ditch/drainage work and another \$4.52 million on paving, including 8.8 miles of County Road 6 near Lonsdale and Veseli. Slightly less than half of the total came from the county's sales tax, approved in 2013 to help fund road and bridge projects. Another \$433,000 came from the wheelage tax, a \$20 fee assessed to every vehicle in the county.

Engineering staff spent a considerable amount of time in planning mode, preparing for an oversize roundabout at the I-35/Hwy. 19 interchange. The six-legged roundabout is scheduled for a 2022 groundbreaking, which Luebbe anticipates will be pushed back. That won't likely impact the completion date, he told the Rice County Board of Commissioners at its Dec. 21 meeting.

"Construction is doable in one season," he said.

Funding for the \$4.2 million project, much of which is coming from state grants, is secure, Luebbe assured the board.

The roundabout, to be located on the east side of the I-35/Hwy. 19 interchange, will improve traffic safety and keep traffic moving. Traffic in the area has increased significantly since the Flying J Travel Center remodeling project and with continued growth, particularly in Lonsdale.

Most significant for Highway Department staff in 2021 was their office space. The \$3.77 million addition/remodeling project was completed in December 2020, giving them a whole year to enjoy the new space. The 1975 shop, on 20<sup>th</sup> Street in Faribault, was almost completely remodeled. Not only was new office space added, an existing truck bay was expanded and warm storage was built for the county's fleet of snow plows.

Luebbe calls the changes "a great improvement," and says "I think we're well prepared from a facilities perspective for years and years to come."

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