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Samuel Hoffman | The Journal Gazette A stake with pink and white ribbons marks the spot of the working shaft for the 5-mile-long Three Rivers Protection and Overflow Reduction Tunnel to reduce the number of combined sewer overflows into city rivers.



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Tunnel time: Work begins on massive river project

DAVE GONG | The Journal Gazette

Work on Fort Wayne's Three Rivers Protection and Overflow Reduction Tunnel is officially underway.

City and construction officials broke ground Thursday on the \$188 million project, which will lie 200 feet under the surface and is expected to run five miles, from Fort Wayne's water pollution control plant to Foster Park. The tunnel is part of a 2008 agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on significantly reducing the number of combined sewer overflows into Fort Wayne's rivers.

The project is funded through rates paid by City Utilities customers.

"The fact now that we're in a position to provide a service that not a lot of cities are in a position to do, I think speaks volumes for us as a community," Mayor Tom Henry said. "What we're doing today is not only a real tremendous part of the history of Fort Wayne as far as stepping up and realizing what the future is all about, but also recognizing all of those who made this happen."

Construction is expected to take about four years and is being done by S.A. Healy and Salini Impregilo, a joint venture that has done similar projects in more than 50 countries worldwide.

"Changing the quality of life of people with the CSOs (combined sewer overflows), with renewable energy, this is at the core of what our company does," said Giuseppe Quarta, president of S.A. Healy Co., adding that the Fort Wayne tunnel is the fourth of its kind the firm has built in the U.S. "We fully appreciate that this is the largest project that the city of Fort Wayne has awarded, and we are committed to making this project a success."

Once the tunnel is complete, Fort Wayne will see a 90 percent reduction in the amount of combined sewer overflows entering the rivers. That's a reduction, on average, of more than 850 billion gallons per year, said Matthew Wirtz, deputy director of City Utilities. The project will directly affect 30 neighborhoods and nearly 45,000 residents who live near the rivers by reducing basement backups and street flooding.

"This \$188 million will create and support about 4,500 direct and indirect jobs over the next several years," Wirtz said. "Those are salaries that will be invested in our community."

Several Fort Wayne City Council members were also on hand Thursday to celebrate the project's start. Those present were Councilmen Paul Ensley, R-1st; Tom Didier, R-3rd; Geoff Paddock, D-5th; Michael Barranda, R-at large; and Tom Freistroffer, R-at large. Former City Councilman Marty Bender, R-at large, was also present Thursday.

"I thank everyone here, especially our City Council who voted on this increase. It wasn't an easy vote, and they're never easy when you're wanting to do something that's right for the community as a whole," Didier said. "We're going to have cleaner rivers, which is going to help riverfront development. We're going to have cleaner rivers that are going to help people access the rivers and enjoy the community and enjoy the essence of what we have."

Once the working shaft is finished, the tunnel boring machine, which will perform the excavation, will be delivered in June 2018. The machine is expected to launch that August. The tunnel will be operational by 2023.