

ERA OF RECONSTRUCTION BEGINS; LEAVITT'S SIGNATURE STARTS 1-15 WORK

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With television cameras cranking and Interstate 15 traffic barreling by overhead, Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt on Tuesday removed his suit coat with a flourish, rolled up his sleeves and declared: "Let's get to work!"

The event? Formal kickoff for the 4 1/2-year, \$1.59 billion reconstruction of Interstate 15. The ceremony marked the governor's signing of a "notice to proceed" document that authorizes Wasatch Constructors to begin moving heavy equipment onto the 17-mile stretch of roadway through the Salt Lake Valley.

It was the second major transportation groundbreaking in less than a week and decidedly different in tone from the earlier ceremony that symbolically launched construction of the valley's 15-mile light-rail system. There, as many protesters as supporters showed up, waving anti-light-rail signs and generally spoiling the party planned for weeks by Salt Lake City and the Utah Transit Authority.

The difference in public reception for the two projects probably can be summed up in a light-rail protester's banner: "You Will Have to Pry My Steering Wheel From My Cold, Dead Fingers."

Utahns in love with their cars appear to have no quarrel with paying big money on roads, but are leery of spending millions on mass transit.

Tuesday's I-15 fanfare was staged to perfection. It was held on a remote tiny strip of grass at the west end of the 600 South off-ramp -- a 30-year-old structure due for demolition and reconstruction in the next four years.

On hand with the governor were Jane Garvey, acting administrator for the Federal Highway Administration; Tom Warne, executive director of the Utah Department of Transportation; Conway Narby, Wasatch Constructors project director; and Ellis Armstrong, Utah's first director of highways who served in the 1950s and early 1960s when I-15 originally was planned.

Dignitaries performed for the cameras, peering through surveying equipment and planting flag-decorated wooden stakes to mark the project's symbolic center line.

Garvey threw away her prepared notes and spoke "from my heart" about how the massive public-works project will serve as a model for the nation.

Using a time-saving process, the contractor will design the roadway and its structures as work proceeds. Normally, an undertaking of I-15's scope would take 10-plus years to complete. But I-15 is expected to be rebuilt and widened by mid-2001, in time for the Winter Olympics in February 2002.

Motorists will not see many changes on I-15 for at least a few more weeks.

Through the end of April, survey crews will work near 9000 South -- with periodic lane closures between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Then signs will go up on 600 North ramps indicating the bridge and viaduct will be closed to east-west traffic in mid-May for up to a year as those structures are demolished and rebuilt.

In late May, crews will begin reinforcing freeway shoulders and median strips. By midsummer, they will start to switch traffic from one side to the other. Single-lane closures are expected during the shoulder-reinforcement work.

Wasatch Constructors spokesman Greg Brooks promised to release a more detailed work schedule next week.