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The Iowa Department of Transportation today opened a rerouted section of Highway 17 and the overpass above the Union Pacific Railroad's tracks east of Boone.

The bridge at the intersection of Highway 17 and 200th Street now allows traffic on Highway 17 to avoid stoppages at the previous crossing at Jordan. Especially important for our local economy, it will allow uninterrupted travel to and from Boone's industrial park. The lack of such access has stymied traffic from the Fareway grocery store warehouse and other businesses for decades, added untold expenses for companies in the form of overtime pay and idling vehicles' wasted fuel.

Representatives from the public-private partnership responsible for the construction of a bridge over the Union Pacific Railroad's tracks east of Boone celebrated the long-awaited project's completion during a ceremony at the Cobblestone Convention Center last Wednesday.

A short time before the event, officials from the City of Boone, Boone County and the Iowa Department of Transportation were joined by a large contingent of area businessmen and women for a brief ribbon-cutting ceremony on the 410-foot-long bridge at the intersection of Highway 17 and 200th Street.

"Three government entities and two business organizations that came together in a big way to make something incredibly significant happen," said Dan Culhane, president and CEO of the Ames Chamber of Commerce.

Gabe Nelson, a civil engineer who led the Snyder & Associates design team, noted that the project has been in the works since initial discussions took place in 2014. "It's had a lot of public support since we've been involved but one of the first things I do when I start designing a project is (review archived photos on an official website). You can go back to the 1930 photo, and some engineers ... actually wrote 'check railroad traffic to see if it will justify an overhead,'" Nelson said. "So, this project has been thought about for a very long time."

Tony Gustafson, the DOT's District 1 engineer, described the \$20 million bridge as a "challenging but really fun project." He praised city and county officials for their efficient approval of agreements, such as the transfer of jurisdiction, required to move construction ahead. "It went very smoothly and was done well before the project," he said.

Gustafson said the bridge's "gigantic pluses," in addition to greater access, includes the closing of three at-grade crossings. "This project is all about safety and mobility," he said. "We're able to close three at-grade crossings with the railroad, which is a big safety improvement. Of course, the bridge provides great access and easy mobility to the Boone Industrial Park from U.S. 30 – so a couple of gigantic pluses there."

He noted the project was not without its share of challenges, including those related to environmental services, utility relocations, and soil remediation. "If we hadn't done some special soil remediation, it would have taken 19 years for the fill to settle," he added.

Boone County Supervisor Steve Duffy said there were “trying times, but this was a fun project because we had everybody committed to getting this done because it was so obvious that it had to be done.”

He recalled attending DOT district meetings and transportation commission meetings, and “they were wonderful people.”

Duffy added, “What’s so neat about this project is that it involves so many different groups of people. The DOT did so much for us. The City of Boone, we worked together a lot on this project. Fareway, of course, not only contributed greatly to this project, but they greatly needed it. There was a serious situation where there’d be a quarter mile of trucks stopped (at the Quartz Street crossing).”

He noted that the overpass will now allow for trains to be parked from just east of Story Street all the way to the Landus grain elevator at Jordan.

Boone Mayor Pro Tem Steven Ray said that the overpass project was “something on the radar” 19 years ago when he was sworn in as a city councilman. “It ebbed and flowed and new things would come along, and new ideas, and they’d ebb and flow, but I have to tell you that this is a monumental day,” he said. “It’s been a wonderful moment for Boone and our wider economic region because it’s a demonstration of private and public partnership coming together for a shared vision.”

He continued, “A project like this requires collaboration and, for me, that’s the takeaway for today. And together there was a shared vision for growth and success, but this does not just require a vision that requires capital, and that money was invested by both private and public entities represented here. I think that’s important to note because when we can see private and public partnerships working together, it also instills faith in our constituents and our community.”

Fareway CEO Reynolds Cramer likened the interaction of the project’s participants to the old adage about children on a playground. “When you think about a playground, you think about all the kids and you’re trying to get together and ‘play nice.’ It’s tough sometimes because everybody has their priorities and what they’re trying to accomplish. This was an opportunity that came together and everybody did play nice.”

He noted that infrastructure projects of such magnitude often take a long time to be completed, and added, “For this thing to take as short amount of time as it did is unbelievable. ... What you don’t know is what it really takes to do something like this unless you’ve been at ground level and really seen every little piece.”

Cramer said his priorities for the project were “safety, efficiency, and economic growth: the safety of our people in this county, the people driving through this area; the efficiencies that have now happened, not just for Fareway but for others; and then also economic growth from the standpoint of the industrial park and the ability to grow this area with more opportunities from a business perspective and bringing new opportunities to the area.”

In thanking the Union Pacific as a “great partner” in the project, Cramer noted that a train passed under the overpass as the ribbon-cutting event was concluding. “We waved and the (train crew) honked, and it’s great we can be doing this now,” he said.

Kelly O’Brien, who spoke on behalf of the Union Pacific, thanked all of the partners involved in the project. “We, at Union Pacific, want to be a good community partner. Safety is our number one responsibility, being efficient with our resources and yours, but also being a good community partner so I thank you for your time today and congratulations on this wonderful moment. I’m excited when that’s open and those crossings are closed,” said O’Brien, the railroad’s senior director of public affairs for Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska. “A closed crossing is a safe crossing.”



Photo credit: Eric Smidt – Ames Chamber of Commerce & Economic Development