

Member Communication Experience

Against The Odds: How Pennsylvania's I-78 Reconstruction And Widening Became A Success

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When a complex interstate bridge replacement and interchange reconstruction project over a waterway has a delayed Notice-to-Proceed date and is subsequently stalled by the COVID pandemic, logic would not indicate the project would finish 189 days ahead of schedule. And yet, that's exactly what happened. It's safe to say that along the way there were numerous lessons learned.

"It's safe to say we overcame several schedule-related challenges," said Aaron Barnes, PE, CCM, who served as Project Manager for Urban Engineers, which provided construction management and construction inspection (CM/CI) services for the reconstruction and widening of Interstate 78 and SR 0061. This \$134.5 million construction project, undertaken for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, District 5-0, approximately 75 miles west of Philadelphia in suburban Berks County, PA, included:

- » Complete reconfiguration/reconstruction of the interchange ramps
- » Replacement of the I-78 mainline bridge approach structures
- » Widening and rehabilitation of the I-78 mainline eight-span open spandrel concrete arch bridge structure over the Schuylkill River
- » Widening of the I-78 mainline bridge over Port Clinton Avenue
- » Replacement of the SR 0061 Bridge over I-78



- » Construction of retaining walls, sound barriers, frame and cantilever monotube sign structures.

According to Michael Guidon, PE, Assistant District Executive-Construction for PennDOT, District 5-0, "The project addressed a critical section of Interstate 78 through the rehabilitation and widening of the bridges over the Schuylkill River, Reading Blue Mountain and Northern Railroad, and Port Clinton Avenue, along with the complete reconstruction and reconfiguration of the SR 61 interchange. These improvements have updated aging infrastructure and improved overall traffic operations along an important regional and interstate corridor."

Additional ancillary items included highway lighting, ITS devices, drainage system improvements, guide rail, safety barriers, signing, pavement marking, and delineators. Major work was completed in seven traffic phases while maintaining

two lanes on I-78 at all times. Other project highlights included 80 drilled caissons for the widened arch bridge pier foundations, CSL/TIP testing, and coordination with railroad and utility stakeholders.

Substantial completion was achieved on May 30, 2025, more than six months ahead of schedule; with SR 0061 reopened to unrestricted traffic one month early.

“We overcome challenges with the schedule through a commitment to coordination, communication, and making informed decisions quickly,” said Barnes, while crediting PennDOT and additional stakeholders, including Hamburg Borough, Tilden Township, Schuylkill River Greenways, Reading Blue Mountain and Northern Railroad, and numerous businesses, including a regional Cabela’s.

Continued Barnes, “The entire team helped achieve early completion through phased construction and staged traffic control, allowing simultaneous work in multiple areas. Regular coordination meetings facilitated rapid issue resolution and decision-making. In addition, the team prioritized critical work areas, monitored progress, and collaborated with the contractor to set internal milestones that minimized delays.”

This design-bid-build project was also completed with no formal claims submitted.

“The work was completed within a constrained, high-traffic environment and required careful coordination to maintain mobility throughout construction,” said Guidon. “The project team implemented effective staging and traffic management strategies to limit disruption while maintaining a strong focus on safety for both the traveling public and construction personnel.”

One ancillary benefit was PennDOT’s successful use of its first Mentor Protégé Program, which partners established contracting firms with DBE trade partners to gain further experience with the ultimate goal of obtaining specific work class prequalification status and growing the industry. Urban worked with PennDOT to effectively implement the Mentor Protégé Program, with the contract achieving 10.13% DBE participation, exceeding the 9% goal.

Concluded Guidon, “Overall, the I-78/SR 61 Bridge Replacement and Interchange Reconstruction Project provides long-term benefits by improving reliability, enhancing safety, and supporting continued regional mobility. It reflects a solid and well-coordinated effort to deliver meaningful infrastructure improvements in a challenging setting.” 🦋





About the Author

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