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Folsom's new bridge starts to span canyon

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For weeks, all eyes have been on the whirlwind Big Fix project along Interstate 5 in downtown Sacramento.

But there is another road project – a much bigger and costlier one – taking shape in a secluded canyon in eastern Sacramento County, virtually unnoticed except by hawks overhead and deer spying from behind scrub oak.

The newly named Folsom Lake Crossing, an estimated \$132 million commuter bypass road and bridge minutes from downtown Folsom, has been under construction for a year and is expected to open in June 2009.

Not that many would know.

Unlike most urban road projects, the two-mile parkway and its lean bridge over the American River are taking shape in a desolate, fenced-off canyon of oak, pine and dry grass.

With federally controlled Folsom Dam looming a quarter-mile north and Folsom State Prison one hillside to the south, it's a construction site literally under armed guard.

Early on, construction crews were banned from wearing denim so prison tower guards wouldn't mistake them for runaway inmates.

"One guy made that mistake one day," said project manager David McDaniel of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Luckily, construction officials pulled him aside before he wandered into the guards' view.

The bridge is mainly out of sight, but not out of the minds of Folsom city officials.

"It's great," Folsom Mayor Eric King said this week.

It is expected to accommodate tens of thousands of daily commuters – many from Placer and El Dorado counties – who now crowd Folsom streets and other local bridges.

The four-lane bridge will connect East Natoma Street on the east with Folsom-Auburn Road on the west. It will have paths for cyclists and pedestrians.

A good current view of the construction site is from the bike and recreation trail about a mile above the Rainbow Bridge.

The new span was born of trauma and desperation.

Federal anti-terrorism officials closed the old commute road on top of Folsom Dam in 2003 as part of a national effort to tighten security at federal facilities.

The result on the streets of Folsom was traffic chaos, angry merchants and frustrated residents, officials said.

After intense lobbying by Folsom city officials, the federal government authorized the new road and bridge, paid mainly by federal funds, but also with state and local funds.

It came, however, without a name.

Some entries in a recent contest to name the bridge reflected Folsom's frustration. One suggested "Homeland Security Made Us Build This Bridge." Another offered "It's About Dam Time Bridge."

The City Council chose Folsom Lake Crossing even though the bridge crosses the American River, not the lake.

The new road will edge at one point close to the lake, but construction officials admit most drivers are going to see little more than the guardrail above the embankment leading to the lake.

Workers reached a project milestone last week. With the two bridge piers finished, crews have begun building the actual bridge deck.

Stemming out into air from the top of each pier, the slightly arching, horizontal segments will grow 12 feet at a time until they connect in the middle, sometime in October.

Meanwhile Folsom city officials have run into a financial bind.

Originally, the bridge was to cost \$117 million. The price tag has crept to an estimated \$132 million, according to Folsom officials.

Some of that was agreed upon – and funded by federal and local sources – so that the road could be four lanes rather than two. The old dam road was a slim two-laner.

But workers also had to blast through more granite than expected at the base of the two piers, and the project coffers now are short by \$5 million.

Folsom city officials are lobbying Congress to come up with the extra money. If Congress doesn't, Folsom will be on the hook.

"It might mean we'd have to reprogram other transportation projects," said Rich Lorenz, Folsom city public works director. But, he vowed, "we're going to make sure the bridge gets completed, one way or another."

Amid heat, dust and smog Thursday, corps project manager McDaniel was pleased to show visitors the secluded project site.

But it's not like nobody is watching the project, he said. "I saw a nice three-point buck yesterday."

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Mark Soulie, an ironworker on the Folsom Lake Crossing bridge project, ties together steel bars that will go in place as the center span is built.

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A crane rises from one of the piers that will support the new span across the American River in Folsom. The bridge is set to open in June 2009.

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