

ROAD WARRIOR: Dam bypass heads for finish line

It's not too difficult to reach back seven years and pull out a bunch of negative junk from the 2003 trunk. It was the year American troops invaded Iraq. The space shuttle Columbia disintegrated during re-entry.

Closer to home, four of our esteemed Clark County commissioners -- both past and present -- were handed federal indictments for providing us with dishonest services.

But down south near the tip of our state, something positive was unfolding: After years of designing and planning, physical signs could be seen that construction of a long-awaited bridge across the Colorado River was finally under way.

The bypass is formally named the Mike O'Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge. As a side note, O'Callaghan was our state's governor for eight years and left office. Tillman was killed in Afghanistan after abandoning a lucrative NFL contract in favor of serving his country.

Who would have guessed the Hoover Dam bypass would become an engineering marvel second only to its neighbor, the Hoover Dam itself? Crews faced overwhelming challenges, from digging foundations off steep canyon walls to erecting the tallest pre-cast columns in the world.

Then there was the pressure of Hoover Dam. It was almost like the dam workers were there, staring and wondering whether project manager Dave Zanetell's crews could pull off something nearly as spectacular as their wonder that opened in 1935.

"We are in the shadow of Hoover Dam," Zanetell said last week. "We are not only building a very tough civil works project, but we're doing it in the shadow of the greatest civil engineering project ever created. It creates a heavy standard of responsibility."

After enduring furious winds that knocked down a crane system in 2006, and mourning the deaths of two construction workers, Zanetell and crew members can see the finish line in early November.

"In every phase of this project there has been an enormous and significant challenge that has been met," Zanetell said. "It's an enormous challenge just keeping the focus and the intensity and the energy across all the teams for that long."

"I know that we're doing something that we believe is special and great. Every one of us trade and craft workers, all of us are pretty honored to be a part of this."

The span itself looks to be complete to casual onlookers, but plenty of work is left to do. Crews must finish the roadway leading up to the bridge; five miles of new roadway was carved into the desert in both Arizona and Nevada to swiftly guide motorists past switchbacks and hairpin turns that can back traffic up for hours.

They still must tie the new road to the existing Highway 93, then proceed with the final paving and signage.

"We're in a hard press to the finish line," Zanetell said. "Our sense is that we will be able to step back and enjoy this and relax when we're done. Right now, there is no time to breathe or let down."

In the meantime, motorists still prefer to take the much-delayed route across Hoover Dam, not just to see Hoover Dam, but the bypass.

When it is finished, the bridge will not only shave off nearly an hour of drive time to Kingman, Ariz., it will find its place in record books. At 890-feet tall, it will become the second-highest bridge in the nation, the world's highest concrete arch bridge, according to Eric Sakowski's website highestbridges.com. To illustrate the size, Zanetell said the tallest columns on the bridge are the length of a football field.

For those of you keeping score at home, the tallest bridge in the United States is the Royal Gorge Bridge at 955 feet in Canon City, Colo., and the world's highest span is the Siduhe River Bridge in China, which is 1,550-feet tall.

Watching the construction of the bypass has been a thrill only to be outdone by the smooth trip traveler's will be treated to this upcoming holiday season.

If you have a question, tip or tirade, call Adrienne Packer at 702-387-2904, or send an e-mail to roadwarrior@reviewjournal.com. Please include your phone number.