Del. 1 work at end of road

Last stretch to open next month

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■ The final stretch **Page 4**

SMYRNA — Fifteen years have dwindled to days as Delaware's largest public works project, the 51-mile Del. 1 expressway, is scheduled to open in full in three weeks.

The $1 billion project, which began construction in August 1988, connects Bear and Dover with a 65-mph roadway.

Sections of the limited-access highway have been accessible for several years. The last stretch, an eight-mile segment between Odessa and Smyrna, is approaching completion.

Opening the final segment will require an intricate coordination of several traffic changes, including closing part of Del. 1 for nearly two days, said David B. Duke, project resident engineer for the state Department of Transportation.

"We are coming to the end of a long road of trying to open (Del. 1), and there is a major traffic switch coming," Mr. Duke said. "This traffic switch is one of the most challenging ones we've ever had to do.

"At 6 p.m. May 18, we will close (Del.) 1 northbound at the south Smyrna exit. Traffic will have to use U.S. 13 through the town."

Mr. Duke said the closure is necessary to allow construction crews time to connect the unfinished segment of road with the existing highway at the north Smyrna exit.

Simultaneously, traffic along U.S. 13 north of Smyrna will be restricted to one lane in both directions.

There will be major traffic delays as a result, he said, and those returning from the beaches are encouraged to

See **Road** — Page 4

Road

Continued From Page 1

use Del. 9 or Del. 15 as alternate routes.

Throughout the 48-hour period, Del. 1 southbound at Odessa slowly will open to traffic.

Mr. Duke said the traffic headaches expected May 18-19 are necessary to complete Del. 1 before Memorial Day weekend and the races at Dover International Speedway, which are slated for the following weekend.

"We are going to need a window of a good 24-36 hours of dry weather during the week of May 18 to finish this," Mr. Duke said.

The grand opening of the roadway will be celebrated May 20 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony involving Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, he said.

Mr. Duke, who has worked on the project since 1989, said the end of the road brings joy and sadness, because the team of engineers has become a family.

The joy of a completed highway will be shared by motorists, he said.

"For commuter traffic to go from I-95 to Dover without hitting a single signal intersection is a tremendous relief," he said.

The expressway will reach its final form by July. Work to eliminate current transitions from Del. 1 to U.S. 13 near Smyrna and Odessa is expected to be finished in September.

At that time, Mr. Duke will move onto another Del. 1 project, constructing high-speed E-ZPass toll lanes at the Dover toll plaza.

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