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WORK has officially begun on Cairns's largest road construction project, bringing with it an expected 400 jobs and a commitment to use 80 per cent local resources.

After a decade of planning and consultation, the first sod was turned yesterday in the \$150 million Cairns southern access corridor project.

About 55,000 commuters, who use the Bruce Highway on weekdays can expect to save eight minutes on the road each way during peak-hour traffic.

Once complete, it will ease congestion along the highway and Ray Jones Drive for traffic travelling to and from the southern suburbs of Cairns.

The development will provide two additional lanes along Ray Jones Drive, more service roads and noise barriers.

An overpass is being constructed at Ray Jones Drive for traffic accessing Mulgrave Rd and another at Sheehy Rd to service southern residents.

Anderson Rd in Woree will be permanently closed and replaced by a new cycle and pedestrian bridge to give students safer access to nearby schools.

About 400 jobs will be created, with 300 of those awarded to local firms.

The two-year construction effort will be the joint venture of BMD Group



It's official: Turning the first sod on the highway project yesterday are (from left) Cr Rob Pyne, Senator Jan McLucas, MP Curtis Pitt, Minister for Transport Craig Wallace and MP Desley Boyle. Picture: ANNA ROGERS

and Albem Operations, who were announced as the successful contractors yesterday.

The contractor has committed to sourcing more than 80 per cent of construction resources locally.

The heavily-congested Ray Jones Drive will be extended to six lanes from Mulgrave Rd along to Chinaman Creek to ease the peak-hour bottleneck of traffic.

The problem Ray Jones Drive/Rigg St intersection will also be bypassed, with all traffic to travel along an overpass, and replace traffic lights.

Division 3 councillor Rob Pyne welcomed the long-awaited project.

"The word I had been hearing from locals was

'Will I ever see it happen?'" he said.

"It's a huge weight from their shoulders."

Drivers from Forest Gardens and Mount Sheridan will find easier access to Woree and Bayview Heights via a new service road that will separate their journey from the Bruce Highway.

Cr Pyne said this would help ease the school-run traffic and help parents avoid the rat-race through back streets.

Cairns Chamber of Commerce regional chairman Brett Moller said the project offered some promising rewards.

"Currently, during peak-hour, it can be a nightmare, especially in wet weather," he said.

"I commute from just

south of Gordonvale quite often and during school holidays you can see traffic ease around those peak times of 9am and 3pm, so those overpasses are needed."

Mr Moller said he did, however, hold concerns for the disruptions, which could further exacerbate the problem road during peak-hour.

The extensive road development is expected to cause delays and detours to drivers over the next 18 months.

A Main Roads and Transport spokeswoman said the majority of construction would be done away from the existing roadway ensuring no road closures during peak hours.

New speed restrictions

and temporary detours will also be used over the project.

Senator Jan McLucas and State Main Roads Minister Craig Wallace joined Member for Mulgrave Curtis Pitt to turn the first soil on the first stage of the project yesterday.

Mr Pitt said it was a huge step in the right direction that would cater to the region's projected population growth.

"Currently, if you're travelling along the highway from Edmonton (south) to Cairns (north) there is an intersection and turning lane where they must wait for southbound traffic," Mr Pitt said.

"With an overpass this will take that whole lane of traffic out."

Minister for Main Roads Craig Wallace said the works would be complete before the end of 2013, weather permitting.

"I think motorists will adapt very easily to the new roads," he said.

"It's also part of our scope to look at flood disruptions given the events that occurred earlier this year with hundreds of millions of dollars committed for Queensland's worst affected roads."

Senator Jan McLucas said there was considerable work to be done to fix a road that has withstood a decade of neglect.

She said since the Federal Government took office in 2007 it had quadrupled the annual federal investment in this road from an average of \$110 million a year to \$435 million.

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— Division 3 Councillor Rob Pyne