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Website follows One Mile House Interchange progress

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SAINT JOHN - A group of students at the University of New Brunswick are giving the public the ability to track the construction progress of the One Mile House Interchange.

Engineering students in Fredericton run a website called VRDocumentation.com. It's a unique virtual reality tool that allows people to see how a construction site has changed over time through panoramic photographs.

The large \$75-million overpass is supposed to move heavy truck traffic to the industrial part of the east side and away from the uptown.

On Friday, Transportation and Infrastructure Minister Claude Williams estimated the last bit of work would be finished by mid-December. All that's left is the installation of traffic lights.

In the meantime, with one click on VR Doc, the public can zoom into a portion of the One Mile House Interchange project and see how it looked in November compared to June, for example. The website allows you to load two panoramas in one window side by side to get a feel for how the area has changed.

It offers the public a front-row seat in how government dollars are being spent on a construction project.

Fourth-year UNB civil engineering student Cody Bradley is one of the students who updates the VR Doc website. It's a job that includes travelling to construction sites in person to take photographs.

"In school, you get a lot of theoretical experience. Being able to get on site and see how things are actually done has been big for me," Bradley said. He's considering working as an engineer in the construction industry when he graduates this spring.

Under the direction of engineering professor Lloyd Waugh, VR Doc began as a way to allow project managers to check in on a project without having to travel to every site.

The photographs also help keep a record of how things were built, in case there's a discrepancy in what two people believe happened on a site.

The students used to package the panoramic photos on a USB drive and mail them to clients across the country.

Last winter, they started posting them online to save shipping time and costs.

"We built the site so that we could basically provide the panoramas almost immediately when we're done the processing," Bradley said.

"It allows them to get information really

quickly without having to contact anyone and disturb anyone on site."

This means the public gets to see the same view construction managers see.

The engineering students have clients as far away as Inuvik and Hay River in the Northwest Territories.

But only two projects are viewable to the public now: the One Mile House Interchange and a roundabout being built in Fredericton.

Bradley travels to Saint John every two weeks. He uses a special camera to photograph 10 significant locations that are part of the One Mile House Interchange project.

At each location, he takes 12 panoramic pictures, creating a 360-degree view.

"We stitch the images together. We end up with one image that is made up of all 12. From that, we create a virtual file that allows you to pan and zoom around in it," Bradley explained.

Tracking the construction progress of a highway in pictures is easier than following the construction of a building, Bradley said. Putting up walls makes it hard to show the entire view of a project.

It won't come as a surprise to Saint Johners that the biggest challenge in creating a digital record of the One Mile House Interchange has been actually seeing the site clearly enough to photograph it.

"It's quite foggy and rainy," Bradley said.

"We try to get (photos) on a set date every

two weeks to keep it consistent. Some of the dates don't look so good because of the weather. That would be unique to Saint John for sure."

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