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Milwaukee streetcar to start construction in April for fall 2018 start of service

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Construction of Milwaukee's downtown streetcar system will officially begin in April, when crews start to dig up 10-foot-wide sections of North Fourth Street and West St. Paul Avenue to make way for the tracks.

That will launch the expected \$62.13 million in construction work on the streetcar's first phase, which would open for service in mid-fall 2018. An \$18.15 million second phase, adding a loop to the downtown lakefront from North Milwaukee Street, would start construction in spring 2018 and start passenger service in mid-fall 2019.

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It'll be a public works project unlike any the downtown has seen in recent years, involving several different types of work. Contractors since late 2015 have been digging up downtown streets to move utilities for the project, but no work has formally begun on the streetcar system itself.

The work will be phased, and take place for several months at a time along various stretches of the route. Streets will be reduced to one-way traffic while the heavy construction is underway, and there will be less frequent full closures of streets or intersections.

Before contractors start digging up St. Paul Avenue to start the project, sections of rail will be delivered to a spot west of the Milwaukee Intermodal Station in March.

"The first visible thing people will see is the delivery of the rail," said Department of Public Works Commissioner [Ghassan Korbán](#).

The rail work is a complicated endeavor in itself. The rail will be delivered in 80-foot segments and stored along the curb. Crews will weld them together on the street into lengths of up to 320 feet, around the length of a football field.

Those segments will be carried into place along the 10-foot trackline trenches dug into the road, and secured in place.

The contractors and the city picked five locations along the streetcar route where the tracks will be stored and welded together, Korbán said. Those spots were carefully selected so that, once the track is welded into 320-foot lengths, they won't have to make any sharp turns along city street corners to get to their ultimate resting place, he said.

“The locations were selected thoughtfully in order to avoid pulling those long track pieces around corners,” Korban said. “Where they are stored they are aligned in the direction they are headed to.”

Crews must also drill foundations and erect poles along the route to support overhead wires that will power the streetcar.

As it is phased now, the work on St. Paul Avenue between Fourth Street and the Milwaukee River would last from April into late fall. Concurrently, construction would begin on North Broadway this summer. North Jackson Street and East Ogden Avenue on the northern end of the route would see construction start around June.

Work is timed to avoid conflicts with major downtown festivals, Korban said. Construction will not begin on St. Paul Avenue east of the Milwaukee River until late summer, for example.

“We’re continuing to talk to stakeholders,” Korban said. “Although we think we have a good handle on schedules and needs and festival dates, we are always open to make revisions.”

Full street closures will be reserved for unusual circumstances during the project. One expected full street closure will be St. Paul Avenue between Broadway and North Water Street, outside the Milwaukee Public Market.

“By closing that block, that will make the work more efficient and we will get it done in a shorter period of time,” Korban said.

Reporter Sean Ryan covers commercial and residential real estate for the Milwaukee Business Journal and through the [Real Estate Roundup](#) blog on the website. He also covers construction, highways and public transit.