

NEW UDOT BOSS FOCUSES ON LEGACY HIGHWAY

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TAYLORSVILLE -- John Njord started a new administration at the Utah Department of Transportation on Tuesday with a nod to the past and a promise that the proposed Legacy Highway will rival the newly reopened Interstate 15 for innovation.

"We, as a Department of Transportation, have set a new standard of excellence," Njord said in a news conference before hundreds of department employees. "We are recognized around the country as leaders in partnerships and, of course, design-build."

Njord, who served as outgoing Executive Director Tom Warne's deputy director since last year, comes to the job just as most of the I-15 ramps and access roads through the Salt Lake Valley are opening after four years of construction.

Gov. Mike Leavitt moved quickly after Warne announced last week that he will step down to work as a consultant. The governor said the choice was easy, given how happy he and colleagues in state government are with the freeway that would have taken at least eight years to rebuild if the department had not hired a contractor to design it as construction went along.

"There just was no reason to hesitate," Leavitt said.

Njord appointed Carlos Braceras, a UDOT regional director in Orem, to replace him as deputy director. Braceras led the department's Legacy Highway planning team before being promoted last year.

Njord made it clear that Legacy's first leg -- four lanes stretching 13 miles from Salt Lake City to Farmington -- is the state's next transportation priority.

"The Legacy Parkway is certainly our next flagship," he said. "We've opened our last flagship [I-15]. They're using it. They like it."

The proposed \$423 million Legacy freeway currently is held up by environmental litigation and has a court date July 26.

Other priorities will include the 2100 South Freeway, Interstate 80, I-15 north and south of the Salt Lake Valley and safety improvements on U.S. Highway 6. He acknowledged money probably will be tight, setting up a possible competition among those projects.

Njord has a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the University of Utah and has worked for UDOT since 1988.