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Yes, there really is a highway being built to Caldera

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They are at work building the San José-Caldera highway. Honest!

But you can't see the work because the concessionaire for the \$230 million job started in the middle, according to a spokesman for the concession holder.

This is the phantom highway that has been 30 years in the making. The key bridges were up seven years ago, but the paperwork and the process of picking a concession holder had more moves than a belly dancer.

Finally Jan. 17 President Óscar Arias Sánchez inaugurated the new project, but he did so in the equipment yard of the concession holder Autopistas del Sol. Then no one saw any real work.

The company reports that there is work, but the job is on the 38-km (24-miles) middle section that runs from Ciudad Colón to Orotina. This stretch, the ones with the idle bridges, is expected to be in operation in 30 months. That would make the opening sometime in July or August 2010.

Costa Ricans have become so used to false starts, over-optimistic announcements and incorrect

timetables that most will not believe the highway exists until they can drive it from San José to the Pacific.

One advantage of starting in the middle is that there is no traffic control problem because the existing roadbed and the lonely bridges are only used by small amounts of local traffic. By May the concession holder should be at work on the stretch between the Gimnasio Nacional in Parque la Sabana and Ciudad Colón. That job, involving some 14 kms (about nine miles), should take about a year. Extensive traffic detours and delays are expected.

The highway already exists and is mostly four- and six-lanes except as it approaches Ciudad Colón.

The whole stretch will be getting various improvements under the plan. This is the Autopista Próspero Fernández that runs past Santa Ana where it becomes just two lanes.

Work is not scheduled until November on the 24 kms from Orotina to Caldera. This is an existing two-lane stretch, too, that will be improved, and plans call for just six months of work.

Speed on the new section is estimated to be 80 kph, about 50 mph. The other two sections will have legal speeds of 100 kph or about 60 mph, said the Autopista del Sol.