

METRO-MOBILITY TALKS

How Will Texas Handle Increase Volume Of Goods?

DESIGNATING A TEXAS FREIGHT CORRIDOR

A plan to improve the way freight shipments travel through Texas on their way to and from Mexico is under way, and a key component in bringing Interstate 69 to fruition is the upgrading of existing highways wherever possible in coming years.

The Alliance for I-69, a 501(c)(6) nonprofit organization, has been advocating a special trade corridor known as Interstate 69 since 1994. The Alliance, composed of local governments, economic development groups, port authorities, and private-sector associate members, believes a designated freight corridor is needed to handle the increase in trade expected over the coming decades.

I-69, designated as such by Congress from the Rio Grande to Northeast Texas and on to Indiana, is already a major freight corridor, and the level of rail and truck traffic will increase in Texas regardless of whether new transportation capacity is built.

Texas gained thousands of new manufacturing jobs in the past 10 years, the Alliance says, and that means increased freight now and in the future. Texas leads the nation in exports, and the state's imports and exports are doubling every 10 years. Panama Canal expansion will alter world freight flow patterns profoundly when completed in 2014, increasing the volume of goods moving on Texas highways and railroads.

The Alliance is exploring a new technology known as the Universal Freight Shuttle, which would use elevated guideways in existing rights-of-way to shuttle freight.

The Alliance believes that, by upgrading existing highways, it will be possible to create an efficient system from Texarkana to Houston and on to the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Laredo. I-69 also will improve highway access to the state's seaports. I-69 can be built over a period a several years as a series of individual projects, the Alliance says, that will bring the entire route to interstate highway standards.

In Texas, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) designated I-69 as a priority corridor, and since 1999 Congress has provided more than \$60 million in funding for ongoing environmental studies in Texas. The Transportation Commission appointed a 24-member I-69 Corridor Advisory Committee and five sector committees to advise it on what I-69 should be in their areas.

In June 2008, the Transportation Commission chose Zachry American Infrastructure and ACS to develop I-69, including preparing a master development and financial plan. ZAI/ACS also will develop a specific plan for upgrading U.S. 77 south of Corpus Christi. This may serve as a model for how much of the rest of I-69 in Texas will become a reality, according to the Alliance.

ZAI/ACS has proposed a system financing model involving other toll projects and tolled managed lanes at other South Texas locations, including three in Corpus Christi. They are the proposed Southside Mobility Corridor and managed lanes along SH 358 (SPID) and SH 286 (Crosstown Expressway). Under their plan, ZAI/ACS and their private sector partners will bear the financial risk. ZAI, as part of another partnership, recently raised \$1.3 billion of private funds to complete SH-130 from Austin/Bergstrom International Airport to I-10 at Seguin. This project is now well underway.

ZAI/ACS and the Alliance are conducting meetings with local officials, transportation planners, economic development organizations and chambers of commerce along the entire route. Local community leaders are encouraged to identify projects in their area that are needed and that might be part of a system financing plan that would help pay for portions of I-69 improvements.

Portions of I-69 are under construction today on U.S. 59 in Fort Bend County and in Montgomery County. Interstate highway standard sections have been completed in the past decade on U.S. 59 and U.S. 77/ 281 in several counties, and additional sections could be under construction in three years.

The MPO will host a NHI Talking Freight webinar on the Panama Canal Widening and Implications for Gulf & Atlantic Coast Ports, Oct 21. Details and online registration at www.corpuschristi-mpo.org.

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