NAFTA highway facing problems

EVANSVILLE, Ind. (AP) — It was dubbed the "NAFTA Superhighway," a new interstate that would span the United States, linking Canada to Mexico and easing truck congestion while improving international access for U.S. goods.

Yet five years after Congress authorized Interstate 69, little pavement has been laid on the project expected to cost at least \$8.5 billion. Many roadblocks have occurred at the state level, where disputes have raged from Indiana to Texas about where to locate sections of the new highway.

In Indiana, a decision is expected in upcoming weeks on a route from Indianapolis to Evansville, an Ohio River city near the Kentucky state line.

The determination, coming after years of environmental studies and contentious debate, will allow construction of a key piece of the interstate.

Still, debate is likely to linger over whether the highway is still needed and if Congress will follow through with funding.

Proponents say the interstate

will make travel easier, spur economic growth along it - especially in poor, rural areas - and aid in the transportation of international goods.

Opponents say the project costs too much, and would cause too much farmland and forestry to be destroyed.

The transportation department will ask Congress next year for \$6.6 billion for Interstate 69 as part of reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, said James Newland, executive director of the I-69 Mid-Continent Highway Coalition. The remaining funding would come from matched dollars by the individual states.

The interstate would go through Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. It already exists from Canada, through Michigan, to Indianapolis.

"In a world market, we need faster, efficient ways of getting our goods to market," said Rep. John Hostettler, a Republican who represents southern Indiana.

"I think it's really an issue of fairness, and an issue of future economic stability.

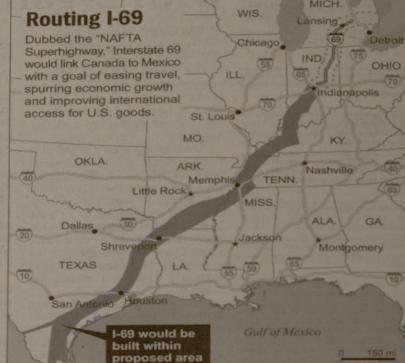
Already, two transportation corridors that make up I-69 have received about \$245 million in federal funds, in addition to funding from other appropriations and other states, according to the Mid-Continent Highway Coalition.

The new interstate is expected to link 10 urban areas with 50,000 or more people, save four hours in travel time between Indianapolis and the Mexican border and help control an increase in truck flow because of the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement.

Divided into 32 sections for construction, it is possible they would not fully be linked until 2020, said James McDowell, a political science professor at Indiana State University.

So far, new construction has only started in Mississippi.

In Indiana, state Transportation Commissioner J. Bryan Nicol long said a route would be selected by the end of the year.



NEWS IN BRIEF

Death toll reach 50 in Venezuelan nightclub fire

CARACAS, Venezuela Investigators recovered more bodies from the debris downtown Caracas ni destroyed by a fast-moving ing the weekend, raising the toll to 50, officials said Monda

Flames quickly engulfed the nightclub packed with hundre dancers but lacking eme exits, triggering a panicky pede late Saturday, Twelve per were injured at La Goajia cotheque.

Faulty wiring, a kitchen fr even a carelessly discarded rette were all possible caus the blaze, which erupted ne club's entrance, Fire Chief Ro Briceno said. The investi continued Monday.

Forensic experts recovered bodies of two women and an from the scene Monday, bri the number of dead to Carmen Julieta Centeno, d of a government forensics as told The Associated Press. Ne all the dead succumbed to

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