

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.

Routing I-69

Dubbed the "NAFTA Superhighway," Interstate 69 would link Canada to Mexico with a goal of easing travel, spurring economic growth and improving international access for U.S. goods.

SOURCES: Associated Press; Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department; ESRI

NEWS IN BRIEF

Death toll reaches 50 in Venezuelan nightclub fire

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Investigators recovered 44 more bodies from the debris of a downtown Caracas nightclub destroyed by a fast-moving fire during the weekend, raising the death toll to 50, officials said Monday.

Flames quickly engulfed the nightclub packed with hundreds of dancers but lacking emergency exits, triggering a panic as people fled late Saturday. Twelve people were injured at La Gaceta nightclub.

Faulty wiring, a kitchen fire and even a carelessly discarded cigarette were all possible causes of the blaze, which erupted near the club's entrance, Fire Chief Roberto Briceno said. The investigation continued Monday.

Forensic experts recovered bodies of two women and a man from the scene Monday, bringing the number of dead to 50. Carmen Julieta Centeno, director of a government forensics agency, told The Associated Press. None of the dead succumbed to the smoke.

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