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West Texas Road to Prosperity?

Any real estate professional who has been around the block a few times knows that the humorous saying “You can’t get there from here” is only partly a joke. A piece of real estate without access to good highways can be a dead end.

So it is not surprising that more than 60 West Texas cities, counties, organizations and businesses have formed a coalition in support of a proposed highway project known as the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor, which would connect Laredo, Texas, to Denver, Colorado. The 1,229-mile project would upgrade existing two-lane highways to divided four-lane highways. The completed highway would be the only major north-south route west of I-35. It would span the entire state of Texas and offer many small West Texas communities something they now lack: a major transportation route.

Most of the economic activity in Texas is concentrated in and around the state’s major cities: Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Austin and San Antonio. These five metropolitan areas generate about two-thirds of the state’s employment and income. Almost 70 percent of the state’s population growth from 1990 to 2000 occurred within these areas as well.

Much of West Texas has not been nearly as prosperous. Many communities west of I-35 are small, with agriculture-related major employment, and incomes below the state average. Population is declining in these regions, prompting city officials to seek economic opportunities to create new jobs and prevent further outmigration.

Proponents maintain that the Ports-to-Plains project would do just that and, in addition to enhancing economic development, would improve highway safety and provide an alternative path for North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) truck traffic heading north from border crossings at Laredo, Eagle Pass and Del Rio. Ports-to-Plains, they say, may well be one of the best long-term economic development tools available to cities along its route.

High Priority on High Plains

The Ports-to-Plains corridor was designated one of 43 “high priority corridors” in the National Highway System, which is made up of a small percentage of roads nationwide that are important to the nation’s economy, defense and mobility. The designation, made through the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998, made the project eligible for federal funding.

The Ports-to-Plains corridor also has been designated part of the Texas Highway Trunk System, a 10,500-mile network of important secondary highways throughout the state. The system was established in 1988 to improve rural highway mobility by identifying key corridors that alternate between two and four lanes and upgrading them to four-lane divided highways. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has already committed \$134 million to increase the amount of four-lane divided highway along the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor.

About 52 percent (430 miles) of the 830 total miles in the Texas portion of the Ports-to-Plains highway are two-lane roadways. Current forecasts for completion of the entire corridor range from ten to 20 years, depending on funding availability. Estimated cost for the project is \$1.2 billion for the Texas section and \$2 billion overall.

Looking for Relief

Studies have shown that most NAFTA truck traffic originating from Texas border crossings is destined for the Northeastern United States. Although current truck traffic patterns do not necessarily support the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor, several factors could boost its desirability as a relief route over the next 20 years.

For example, the magnitude of U.S.-Mexico trade growth could conceivably overwhelm the state's existing interstate highway infrastructure. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, total trade between the two countries grew more than 15 percent per year from 1993 to 2000. When the lower figures for 2001 are included, trade growth still neared 10 percent annually.

A 10 percent annual increase in trade would translate into almost seven times the current trade level by 2021. Although truck traffic may not increase proportionally because of shifts to other modes of transportation, a tripling or quadrupling of truck traffic over this period is not an unreasonable assumption. Congestion of the state's primary trade corridors could become intolerable at some point.

In addition, although new air quality standards are being implemented in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex and Houston, even stricter standards may be necessary during the next 20 years. Stricter air quality standards could conceivably limit pollution volume generated by trucks, causing some portion of the truck traffic passing through metro areas to consider more rural routes.

Even if there is no problem with traffic congestion and air pollution in the state's metro areas during the next two decades, developing the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor may still be worthwhile. A north-south highway would greatly facilitate regional distribution of goods throughout West Texas. The ability to transport agricultural products within and outside the state would be improved as well.

The Ports-to-Plains highway also could provide an attractive alternative for recreational traffic. Winter Texans migrating from northern states to South Texas may find it appealing to avoid the metro areas. Texas captures about 12 percent of the winter visitor market. Spending by this group is estimated to be about \$1 billion annually in Texas alone.

Finally, statistics have shown that highway safety is markedly improved when roadways are upgraded and widened. Twice as many accidents are recorded on nonurban two-lane highways compared with the same number of miles traveled on interstates or four-lane divided highways in Texas.

Millions for Bypasses

Competing for limited highway funds may prove to be the biggest hurdle for the Ports-to-Plains project. Although the project did qualify for TEA-21 funds in 1998, it must be included in a reauthorization of the legislation by Sept. 30, 2003, to continue

being considered for federal funds. Furthermore, a portion of the Ports-to-Plains route that was not originally designated part of the Texas Highway Trunk System must be promoted for acceptance into the system to increase the funding from

that source. The passage of Proposition 15 in last November's statewide election may provide the project with a new

source of funds (see "Highways and Buy-Ways" in *Tierra Grande* Vol. 8, No. 4).

Another challenge will be limiting increases in traffic in the downtown areas of smaller cities along the route. Eight cities along the corridor — Stratford, Dumas, Lamesa, Big Spring, Sterling City, San Angelo, Eldorado and Sonora — will require "reliever routes" or bypasses to avoid congesting their central business districts. The total cost to construct these reliever routes is about \$280 million.

The road is long and winding, to be sure, but coalition members feel the outcome will be worth the effort, and the Ports-to-Plains highway will prove a long-term benefit to the many West Texas communities it will serve. ■

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Improved goods distribution throughout West Texas and alleviation of U.S.-Mexico truck traffic congestion are just two anticipated benefits of the Ports-to-Plains highway.



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