

# Where is I-69?

By Greg Varhaug

Photo courtesy Texas Department of Transportation

Interstate 69 has been in the planning stages for decades. It was to be the main component of the proposed Trans Texas Corridor that Governor Rick Perry endorsed back in 2002. Governor Perry's vision included separate truck lanes, as well as separate rail lines for commuter and freight trains. The project was slated to cost over \$140B, and would have required a 1,200-foot-wide right of way covering 4,000 miles and the purchase of about a half million acres of land.

Plans for TTC-69 upset a lot of Texas land owners, who argued that buying a house 12 miles from the nearest major

highway meant you could reasonably expect that no one was going to build an interstate through your front yard. The TTC met with fierce opposition from the general public, and within a few years, plans for the "super-project" were dropped. But we still needed a plan for improvements to a traffic corridor that serves one-third of the population of Texas.

In 2008, TXDOT took a new approach by establishing an advisory committee and five separate "segment committees" to help craft new plans for upgrading all of US 59, as well as three adjoining highways in the Rio Grande Valley. Each segment

committee is made up of mayors, county judges, council members, and other civic leaders from the affected communities.

Gary Bushell, an Austin lobbyist and a consultant to The Alliance for I-69 Texas, maintains that, despite some claims to the contrary, I-69 and TTC-69 are not the same thing. Speaking about the current I-69 project, Bushell says, "We're staying on the existing footprints, where possible. If we have to get off of existing footprints, it's being done with the consultation of the segment committees, which are local elected officials and local people in the area. It is a project that is now driven from the bottom up, instead of from the top down. And that is the biggest difference between us and the TTC's concept. TTC was being driven from Austin. This [the I-69 project] is being driven from local communities along the route."

## THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

In its current incarnation, I-69 is an initiative to upgrade portions of several United States highways, including all of US 59, to meet federal standards for interstate highways. The interstate will start with three branches. One branch begins with US 59 in Laredo; two other branches begin at the southernmost tip of Texas. US 281 begins in McAllen and intersects with US 59 in George West. US 77 begins in Brownsville and intersects with US 59 in Victoria. From there, US 59 follows the coast through Houston and north to Texarkana. US 59, US 77, and US 281 will all be "cosigned" as I-69.

In May, TXDOT announced that the section of US 83 from Harlingen to Mission had been designated as "I-2." Interstate 2 corresponds to Mexican Federal Highway 2, which parallels the Rio Grande from Matamoros to Ciudad Acuña, across from Del Rio.

Leaving Texas, a section of I-69 outside of Nacogdoches will branch to the northeast, cutting across the corners of Louisiana and Arkansas, where it will follow the east side of the Mississippi River to the southern tip of Illinois. From there, it will cut diagonally across Indiana to terminate in Detroit. A branch near the northern terminus will connect with Chicago.

I-69 will comprise the High Priority

Corridors 18 and 20, as designated by Congress. These are two of the 80 High Priority Corridors outlined in a series of laws passed by Congress, starting with the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act in 1991. I-69 is one of three north-south corridors planned in Texas by the Federal Highway Administration (FHA). Another will connect Texarkana to I-29 in Kansas City and

points north. The third will run from Laredo to Del Rio, Midland, Lubbock, Amarillo, and Denver.

The planned improvements for I-69 in Texas are extensive. Initial cost estimates called for more than 200 diamond-style interchanges (connections to service roads), in addition to direct-connection interchanges (elevated connecting roads), bridges,

overpasses, and drainage. Speed limits may be increased on parts of the highway.

Work on the highway is being done a little at a time. As sections of the road are brought up to interstate standards, TXDOT recommends to the FHA that those sections be designated as part of the interstate. The FHA has suggested that it may relax certain requirements for highways that run through ranch land in the Rio Grande Valley. The first section of US 77 was designated as I-69 in Robstown, outside of Corpus Christi, in December 2011.

### WHY IS THE PROJECT NECESSARY?

The I-69 project looms in importance because of traffic congestion on existing highways, the expected population growth in the region, and a projected increase in overland freight traffic from Mexico and the Port of Houston. It's another instance in which the cost of an infrastructure project is less than the cost of doing



Photo courtesy Texas Department of Transportation

nothing. Delayed shipments, slowed evacuations, accidents, and time spent in traffic all cost money.

Gary Bushell points out that no new interstate highway has been built in Texas since the 1970s, when I-37 from Corpus Christi to San Antonio was completed. Currently, I-35, which begins in Laredo and terminates in Duluth, Minnesota, is the nearest completed north-south corridor to the Valley.

The interstate designation in itself is important to the economies of nearby communities. When large companies are narrowing down possible locations for future expansion, they consider, among other factors, how far a given city is from the nearest interstate. Many companies will not consider locating in cities far from an interstate. For many communities in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the nearest interstate is 130 miles away. Cities along US 59 see the I-69 expansion as a sure way to attract new businesses and increase their local tax bases.

The improved highways will also be safer because they will be “full-access controlled.” That means that they are only accessed by a connected service road. For instance, you can't connect your home driveway directly to an interstate, but you can to a state highway—meaning you risk backing out into rapid oncoming traffic. Controlled access means a lot fewer auto accidents.

### MORE TRAFFIC TO THE PORTS

The Port of Houston is already one of the world's busiest maritime economic hubs. Many analysts predict a slowdown in imports from Europe, but at the same time they are projecting an increase in imports from Asia, which would reach Houston via the Panama Canal. The expansion of the Panama Canal, currently scheduled for completion in 2015, means a new class of larger ships coming to the Port of Houston. A single “Post-Panamax” ship will be able to carry almost three times the amount of cargo than is possible now.

The Port of Houston is upgrading its facilities to handle the larger vessels and increased traffic. The Barbour's Cut channel is being dredged to a

depth of 45 feet. The new, larger ships began arriving at the Port of Houston in 2011. The POHA has three “Super Post-Panamax” cranes at the Bayport Container Terminal, and four more are on order. The Union Pacific Railway is expanding its multimodal services from the Port of Houston.

The Port of Houston Authority supports the I-69 expansion because it will help the hub get imported goods to their markets more efficiently. Houston is also in competition with other Gulf Coast and East Coast ports—including those of Miami, Savannah, and Jacksonville—that are upgrading to accommodate the new larger ships and the expected increase in shipping volume. With the completion of the Panama Canal expansion, I-45 and I-69 will likely become major trade corridors for Asian goods coming to the U.S.

## THE EFFECTS OF NAFTA

Canada and Mexico are the United States’ largest trading partners. Prior to NAFTA, fewer goods were shipped along north-south routes than along east-west routes. Los Angeles and New York have always dominated Gulf Coast ports in the amount of containerized shipping they receive. Consider that imports from Mexico were \$19B in 1985, compared with \$215B in 2012. Exports to Mexico followed a similar trajectory for the same period.

Our road systems haven’t caught up with these new realities. Existing interstate and rail networks are packed far more densely east of the Mississippi River than in the western United States. (There are many more miles of rail than interstate highway.) At present, only four completed north-south interstate corridors exist west of the Mississippi.

A new road and rail infrastructure in the western United States is being designed in light of modern, intermodal methods for containerized shipping. This evolving infrastructure includes a number of “inland ports”: large, strategically placed container yards intended to facilitate international trade by increasing the efficiency of the supply chain.

The International Inland Port of Dallas (IIPOD) is a conglomeration of container yards and industrial parks located near four major highways, a major rail yard, and Lancaster Airport.

The new, sizeable container yard on I-45 in Wilmer is part of the IIPOD. In Texarkana, the Lone Star Ammunition Center, located at the proposed intersection of I-30 and I-69, is being redeveloped into a new business and industrial park, the TexAmericas Center. And there are plans to construct an inland port adjacent to the A.L. Mangham Jr. Regional Airport in Nacogdoches.

Storing empty containers after they’re unloaded, and then getting the empty containers to where they’re needed, is a major logistical challenge. Empty containers are routinely transported by ship and rail. In Houston, we export refined petroleum products to the rest of the world, including huge amounts of plastic polymers and resins to China. Since exports from the Port



**B**esides I-69, four other high-priority north-south corridors originate in Texas and end in Canada. These corridors have been designated by Congress in several pieces of legislation, starting in the 1990s.

The Ports to Plains Corridor, starting in Laredo, connects in Denver to the Heartland Expressway, which terminates in Rapid City. From there, the Theodore Roosevelt Expressway runs through North Dakota and Montana and on to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. These three corridors combined, together with Mexican Federal Highway 85 from Nuevo Laredo to Monterrey, have been dubbed The Great Plains International Trade Corridor.

The short leg of I-69 (Corridor 20) that branches north from Carthage ends in Texarkana. A proposed route will then run north along the Arkansas and Missouri state lines as Corridors 1 and 72 to Kansas City. From there, the route follows I-35 across the center of Iowa and through Minneapolis, terminating in Duluth on the shores of Lake Superior.

Another corridor will comprise I-35, running from Laredo through Dallas, Oklahoma City, and Wichita. Starting in Omaha, it will follow I-29 north to terminate in Winnipeg.

Corridor 27 originates in El Paso, then runs north through New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana, and eventually to Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta.

Asked why he supports the I-69 project, Jerry Sparks of the Texarkana Chamber of Commerce says, "For Texarkana, the expansion of I-69 is a no-brainer. It will be a huge economic boost for Texarkana. All of the goods coming in from the Panama Canal will have better access to the heartland of the country."

Not all of the goods traveling on these corridors flow from south to north. Canadian exports to the United States include cars, auto parts, paper products, lumber, agricultural products, minerals, and crude oil.

of Houston run about 10 percent higher than imports, the POH doesn't have the same problems with accumulations of empty containers faced by most other ports. At the POH, containers arrive full, and they leave full.

## THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

The Valley region, including cities south of the Rio Grande, has had its own unique culture and business customs going back at least 200 years. And the region has always operated as a distinct economic unit.

About 1.3 million people live in the four southernmost Texas counties. McAllen-Edinberg-Mission is Texas' sixth largest metropolitan area, and Brownsville-Harlingen is ranked eighth largest. The McAllen Foreign Trade Zone, the first in the United States not located in a seaport, was established in 1973. Jim Wehmeier, I-69 Segment Two Committee Chair, described the Valley as "the nation's largest metro area currently without an interstate."

Across the border, Reynosa has over a half million people, and over a million people live in or around Matamoros. The Monterrey metropolitan area, about 150 miles from McAllen, is home to about 4 million people. Monterrey is the steel capital of Mexico and the nation's wealthiest city. About 80 percent of Mexico's global trade is with the United States.

Mexico's highways and connecting roads are in better shape now than they were a decade ago. Mexico spent over \$40B on modernizing their highways between 2007 and 2012. Completing I-69 will help to connect existing corridors between Mexico and Canada.

In the Valley, the connecting roads between US 81 and US 283 are a single lane. This has long created major traffic bottlenecks. These highways serve as the main emergency evacuation routes in the area. Expanding these connectors to two lanes, as well as upgrading ramps and overpasses, will help to relieve traffic, especially during peak hours.

## RELIEF ROUTES

The I-69 expansion will follow the footprint of the existing US 59, except in cases where planners are designing

relief routes around communities and established businesses. Nacogdoches, for instance, is considering options for a relief route around the town. Jim Jeffers, the Nacogdoches city manager, says that they have ruled out following the west side of Loop 224, the current US 59, because it would involve displacing too many existing businesses. They are instead recommending a new-terrain route to the west of the Mangham Airport. Relief routes are also being planned around Texarkana, Marshall, Joaquin, Tenaha, and Garrison.

Refugio is one Texas city along the proposed I-69 route for which plans are still up in the air. Refugio could be adversely affected by any changes to US 77, which runs through the middle of town. If you've ever driven from Houston to Corpus Christi, chances are good that you stopped for gas or a meal on US 77 in Refugio. One proposal still being considered calls for a tolled relief route, bypassing the city.

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Opponents to the plan believe that Refugio merchants and restaurants will lose out as a result of the proposed tolled bypass. These businesses usually bring in about \$70,000 per month in local sales taxes. Business expansion along US 77 in Refugio was at a standstill a few years ago because of uncertainties about how the I-69 expansion would affect the city. More recently, businesses have expanded along US 77, because it appears less likely that any significant changes to US 77 in Refugio will occur for at least the next 15 years. Lenny Anzaldua, president of Refugio's

Chamber of Commerce, points out that the funding timetables for the project extend for decades. Refugio's newly elected mayor, Joey Heard, will meet with officials with TXDOT in the coming weeks to resume discussion on plans for I-69.

The paths of the relief routes are probably the last issues associated with the I-69 project to provoke any controversy, and those challenges are likely to be localized. Because plans for some of these relief routes are still open, and because environmental assessments always have to be made before beginning any greenfield construction, the relief routes will probably be the last segments of the I-69 project to be completed. **N**

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