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The Road Ahead

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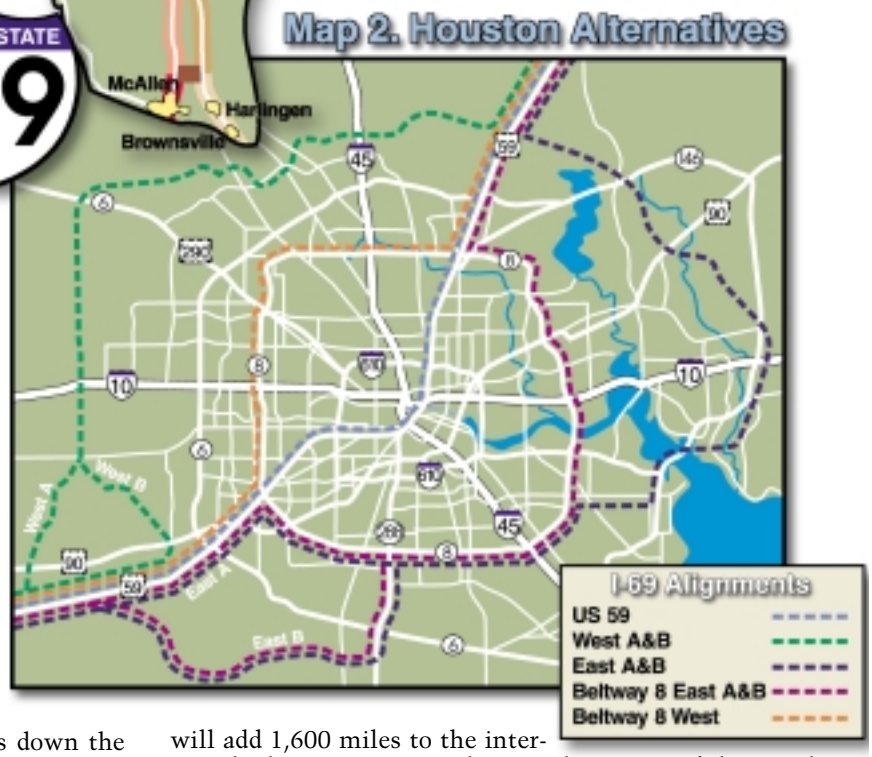


By Harold D. Hunt

Deep in the heart of Texas, congested traffic arteries are straining to keep pace with the ever-growing flow of goods stimulated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The number of big trucks traveling to and from Mexico has increased dramatically since NAFTA was signed in 1994. City leaders along the existing highways hope bypass surgery in the form of a proposed new interstate highway will keep the traffic flowing.

The so-called NAFTA highway — Interstate 69 — may prove to be the solution. When completed, I-69 will cross eight states and connect Mexico to Canada. But relief will not come quickly. While some sections across the nation are under construction, a fully completed I-69 is 20 to 40 years down the road.

Currently, I-69 stretches for about 360 miles, connecting Port Huron, Michigan, to Indianapolis, Indiana. The planned extension of I-69 from Indianapolis to the south Texas border will add 1,600 miles to the interstate highway system, with more than 1,000 of those miles in Texas. Each state is developing plans for the extension.

In Texas, I-69 is projected to stretch from Texarkana to Laredo, from I-37 to McAllen and from Victoria to Brownsville.

A new crossover to Shreveport also is planned between U.S. 79 and U.S. 84.

Consulting firms hired by the Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department, lead coordination agency for the eight states, divided the I-69 corridor into sections of "independent utility" (Map 1). The Federal Highway Administration has approved these sections, which represent pieces of the route that can be constructed and used independently, even if the total I-69 project is never completed. The actual location of the proposed facility within these designated sections has yet to be determined.

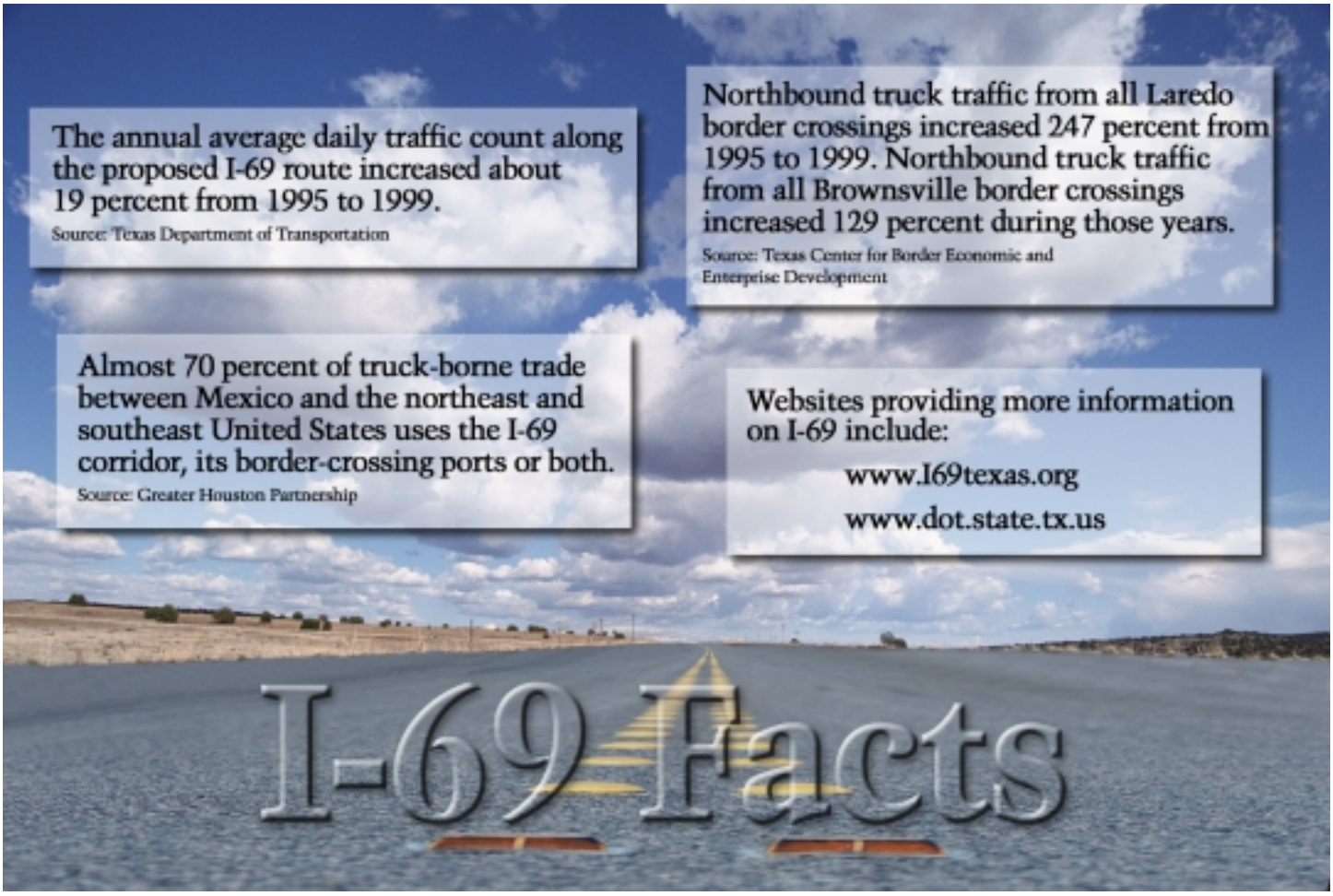
The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) recently selected 11 consulting firms to conduct the environmental analysis and the route location studies for the Texas sections of independent utility. The studies consider the impact proposed routes could have on the natural and social environments along the corridor and will result in the locally preferred alternative. After site selection studies are completed, right-of-way maps of the proposed routes will be drawn. Until the environmental studies have been completed, no potential route within the corridor will be ruled out.

Route location and environmental studies are being funded with both state and federal dollars. Thus far, TxDOT has received about $19 million from the federal government's Border and Corridor Program to study all potential Texas I-69 right-of-way routes. The cost of route location and environmental impact studies alone is projected to exceed $60 to $70 million, with total project cost estimated at more than $10 million per highway mile in today's dollars.

Forecasts for completing the environmental studies within each section vary, ranging from 18 months to more than five years. During this time, TxDOT will provide ample opportunity for citizens along the I-69 corridor to participate in the decision-making process. Affected citizens will be informed in advance about the impact routes under consideration would have on their areas. After the environmental analysis has been completed and the public's concerns have been addressed, TxDOT will begin the final design for the preferred alternative and begin purchasing right-of-way.

No funds have been appropriated beyond the cost of the environmental studies, route location and schematic drawings. If appropriated, approximately 90 percent of the funds for right-of-way purchase and construction will come from the federal government, with the remainder coming from state and local sources. Texas officials are counting on federal highway legislation in 2003 to provide funding for the project.

The bulk of federal funding will come from either National Highway System (NHS) funds or demonstration funds. The NHS program provides money for improvements to rural and urban roads within the system, including the interstate system



and designated connections to major terminals with both rail and air access. Congress appropriates federal demonstration funds based on the eligibility and urgency of each project.

The I-69 project will be constructed in stages, with plans currently calling for the entire route to be built to interstate standards, meaning a divided, controlled access highway with inside and outside shoulders. Look for many of the sections of I-69 through rural areas to be constructed without frontage (or access) roads. The decision to build a frontage road or not will depend on the outcome of a complex cost-benefit formula developed by TxDOT.

The proposed Texas route for I-69 will pass through eight of TxDOT's 25 districts. Although many of these districts have adopted wait-and-see attitudes toward the I-69 project, a few are planning projects with I-69 in mind. The Lufkin district has developed a website (www.59masterplan.com) detailing a corridor master plan for upgrading the section of U.S. 59 passing through Angelina and Nacogdoches Counties. The plan can easily be incorporated into the I-69 project.

The Pharr and Corpus Christi districts have secured $65 million to construct two roadways that will link I-69 with other vital routes. The projects will be constructed simultaneously, with construction beginning within two years. Although their exact location has not been determined, one segment will connect U.S. 77 to I-37 while the other will connect U.S. 281 to U.S. 77.

No district has been more proactive than the Houston district, which represents the largest major population center along the I-69 route. Planning for transportation improvements related to NAFTA has become a high priority. A team of consultants, with input from a local steering committee, has completed the district's I-69 feasibility study.

Freeways, rural roadways, planned new construction and totally new roads were combined in a variety of schemes to develop 31 potential route alternatives through the Houston district. Results of the study, which will be included in the environmental study, narrowed the field of possible routes from 31 to five. According to testimony given before the Texas Senate State Affairs Committee by James Dannenbaum of Dannenbaum Engineering, some of the routes being considered could produce user benefits in the Houston area as high as $3.80 for every dollar invested. As many as 5,200 new jobs could be created in the region as a direct result of I-69.

Dannenbaum's testimony outlined the five route alternatives through the Houston area (Map 2). The first alternative mirrors the current U.S. 59 right-of-way. The *West* alternative would follow the west and north portions of the proposed S.H. 99 from the Richmond-Rosenberg area to its proposed interchange with U.S. 59 north of Houston in Montgomery County. The *Beltway 8 West* alternative follows Beltway 8 west and north from the existing U.S. 59 interchange in southwest Houston to the existing interchange with U.S. 59 in northeast Houston. The *Beltway 8 East* alternative follows Beltway 8 south and east from the existing U.S. 59 interchange in southwest Houston to the existing interchange with U.S. 59 in northeast Houston.

Two options for the *East* alternative have been proposed. This alternative would generally follow the proposed S.H. 99 path along the south and east sides of Houston. However, the first option would follow Beltway 8 south and east from the existing interchange with U.S. 59 in southwest Houston to Fairmont Parkway in southeast Houston, S.H. 146 in Baytown, and Grand Parkway-S.H. 99 in east Houston, to the proposed northern interchange with U.S. 59 in Montgomery County. The second option separates from U.S. 59 south of Sugarland and follows the proposed Grand Parkway-S.H. 99 on the south side of Houston to S.H. 288, then to Beltway 8 South, where it parallels the first option.

Every time an interstate highway or freeway is built, new opportunities for retail and industrial development arise. Plans now being drawn for the I-69 highway offer the promise of future development along the 1,000-plus miles of proposed interstate.

I-69 has not been without its critics. Opponents argue that serious environmental concerns will result from such a large construction project. Others contend that a project of this scope is simply not needed. The most vocal opposition has been largely restricted to opposition groups in southwestern Indiana. It appears the biggest challenges to the project's success are securing the necessary funding, the political debate over the highway's location and concerns of environmental advocates.

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