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Area may link to Interstate 69

Plan could bring millions of dollars to Corpus Christi

By **ALISON BESHUR** Caller-Times
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Chances of linking Corpus Christi to the proposed Interstate 69 corridor from Canada to Mexico have improved with a route to Laredo now included in a pending feasibility study.

The study, which the Texas Department of Transportation will start next year, is among the steps required before the heavily anticipated international trade path can be built.

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Corpus Christi was not included in previous publications of the area under study, said Gary Bushell, a local consultant for the Port of Corpus Christi to the Alliance for I-69 Texas and the Gulf Coast Strategic Highway Coalition.

"There are no routes that have been established, other than conceptual," Bushell said after presenting the new information to port commissioners. "They're all subject to environmental route studies. That's the reason we're staying involved."

Because of limited funding for highway projects, the state transportation agency probably would only build one of several proposed routes to Laredo and one of two routes to the Rio Grande Valley, Bushell said.

Late last month, Texas Department of Transportation officials presented the study area including a direct route from Laredo to the La Quinta Trade Gateway Container Terminal, a proposed container terminal on port-owned property near Ingleside. That route is proposed as a freight-only toll road.

While this area's elimination from the study did not guarantee Corpus Christi would be completely left out of the corridor's development, it did raise concern, said Port Commissioner Judy Hawley, the port board's appointee from San Patricio County, which includes the La Quinta area.

"We knew if we were not included in the environmental study area, it would be difficult to go back," Hawley said. "We wanted to be included from the beginning."

Being left out of I-69 won't spell demise for the Corpus Christi area, she said, but being included would make the area a more attractive gateway for movement of freight and would safeguard millions of dollars in economic development, Hawley said.

Dick Messbarger, executive director of the Greater Kingsville Economic Development Council, said the U.S. Highway 77 Coalition was formed about a decade ago to pool resources and lobbying efforts to lure transportation dollars to areas along U.S. 77.

Earlier this year, the group met with transportation officials in Mexico. The meeting expanded interest in U.S. 77 as part of I-69 and in a larger international system through Mexico to Central America, said Messbarger, a coalition member.

Robert Gonzalez, local lawyer and port commissioner, said the effort is crucial.

"This is a multibillion-dollar issue for Corpus Christi," Gonzalez said after Tuesday's presentation. "It would be devastating for our area to be left out of these transportation plans."

Contact Alison Beshur at 886-4316 or beshura@caller.com

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