



I-69's path laced with economic benefits

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Memphis Business Journal

Updated: 7:00 p.m. ET Dec. 12, 2004

The proposed Interstate 69 that will cut through and around Memphis will bring jobs, greater trade opportunities with Canada and Mexico and more traffic, officials say.

"It has major implications for economic development across West Tennessee over the next quarter century," says state Sen. Mark Norris, R-Collierville. "It will probably be the largest public works project of its kind this century."

I-69 will enter Memphis from the south by connecting with Highway 304 in Mississippi and eventually I-55. From there, I-69 will follow I-240 to I-40, then follow a new alignment west of and parallel to Highway 51 and intersect I-385 southwest of Millington. An outer beltway -- now called 385-- will be finished to provide an alternate route around the city.

"It's going to be a brand new highway built from Millington to 240," says Bill Revell, Dyersburg mayor and chair of the I-69 Tennessee Coalition. Revell expects the Tennessee Department of Transportation to rule on a route near Dyersburg early in 2005.

Trucking industry experts say the interstate could be a boon for companies in the Memphis area and is essential if Memphis wants to retain its reputation as a world class distribution center. In 2001, 88% of U.S. trade with Mexico and 67% of U.S. trade with Canada went by truck.

"That will be the major corridor between Canada, the United States and Mexico and it will reduce transit time on moving goods between the countries," says Mike Starnes, chair of the Memphis Regional Chamber's Regional Logistics Council and founder of M.S. Carriers, which merged with Swift Transportation in 2002. "Memphis is right in the middle. It's location, location, location."

M.S. Carriers transported a wide range of commodities in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario and also provided interline service to and from Mexico.

Starnes says companies shipping goods to Mexico from the East Coast could decide to fly shipments into Memphis where waiting trucks could pick up the products and haul them to Mexico.

Ed Gatlin, chairman of Memphis-based Empire Express, sees opportunity in the "NAFTA Highway."

"We have customers along the I-69 corridor and there is a lot of business into and out of Mexico," says Gatlin, whose company also has operations based out of Laredo, Texas. "It will facilitate trade into Mexico and Canada as well."

Other trucking company executives are less enthusiastic, saying that the money would be better spent maintaining and upgrading existing routes.

"There is a significant interstate structure that exists already and our primary concern is that existing infrastructure be maintained to the level that is required to conduct interstate commerce on before we spend more money on what doesn't exist," says Todd Jadin, vice president of operations at Schneider National, Inc., one of the leading providers of transportation and logistics services. "There clearly are alternatives that can get you into Memphis and all the way to Laredo."

But many politicians have bet on the new interstate and the traffic it will bring.

The increased traffic will flow through towns like Millington, where Mayor Terry Jones sees the new roadway as an engine that could drive economic development.

"We're going to have two interchanges, one at West Union and one at 385, and I think that will bring traffic," he says. "It will relieve all the heavy truck traffic we have going down Highway 51 and right now those trucks aren't stopping and buying fuel because we don't have a truck stop."

Jones says the interchange at 385 and I-69 will be a "major intersection" and he believes "someone will probably invest in a truck stop" at the location.

I-69 already connects Port Huron, Mich., on the Canadian border to Indianapolis. The extension would pick up at Indianapolis and stretch from Indiana to Memphis, through Mississippi and Arkansas, to Laredo, Texas.

The project has been divided into 32 sections of independent utility.

"That was done because we knew we couldn't get all of the \$10 billion to \$15 billion to build it so it was going to have to come in small sections," Revell says.

But Revell says that over time the interstate will pay for itself by facilitating trade between the three countries and by creating new jobs.

U.S. imports from Mexico jumped 175% between 1993, when the North American Free Trade Agreement was passed, and 1999. Mexico is Tennessee's second largest export market, with some \$1.4 billion in goods flowing to Mexico annually.