

## **Mayor says construction on East Texas leg of I-69 may start in near future**

By LYNN WINTHROP, The Lufkin Daily News

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The passage of a \$284 million transportation spending bill by the U.S. House of Representatives last week was important to East Texas more for what it didn't include – an amendment that could have jeopardized the near-term construction of proposed Interstate 69 through the area.

An amendment attached to the Transportation Reauthorization Bill – which funds federal highway and public transportation programs for the next six years – would have prevented the tolling of any new federal highway, but was voted down by the House on Wednesday. While the Senate still has to consider the bill, removal of the amendment means construction of I-69 through East Texas could begin in the near future, instead of several decades from now.

Lufkin Mayor Louis Bronaugh and City Manager Paul L. Parker were among a number of Alliance for I-69 members who traveled to Washington, D.C., last week, lobbying for support for the project. Bronaugh, chair emeritus for the alliance, explained that while the group makes the trip each year, this year's visit was especially timely.

Members of the alliance met with members of the Texas Congressional delegation and their staffs just as "fierce debate" over the bill raged in the House, and persuaded them to vote against the amendment, according to Bronaugh. Eight members who had supported a similar amendment last year changed their vote, he said.

Bronaugh said defeating the amendment is "good news" for I-69, and good news for Lufkin and East Texas. Limiting methods of funding the proposed interstate would likely have seriously delayed construction of the much-talked-about trade route, he said.

U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Tyler, was one of the congressmen who changed their minds about the amendment after meeting with the alliance. Bronaugh said sometimes it's just a matter of bringing new representatives "up to speed" on how important the interstate is to East Texas and more than two dozen other counties in the state.

"We were all in Washington for the same purpose, so we were able to rally the troops. ... It is still alive," he said.

I-69 is a proposed national highway project connecting trade centers in Mexico, the United States and Canada – extending 1,600 miles from Port Huron, Mich., to the Texas/Mexico border. Proponents say that once completed, the interstate will improve safety and mobility while providing efficient movement of people and goods.

The interstate has been incorporated into another highway project in Texas. The Trans-Texas Corridor is a new multi-use transportation system that includes roads,

freight and passenger rail and a utility zone. The combined I-69/Trans-Texas Corridor will stretch approximately 1,000 miles from Texarkana and Shreveport, La., south through Lufkin and Victoria and then to the Texas/Mexico border at Laredo and other points in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Alliance for I-69 wants Texas and other states to be able to use tolling to pay for the construction of the interstate. The group would like to see the method, used to create funding for the Interstate Highway 35 portion of the Trans-Texas Corridor already under construction, duplicated for the interstate.

Cintra-Zachry, a privately-owned Spanish company, offered to pay the state more than \$7 billion to build the I-35 corridor if it could have tolling rights on the highway for the next 50 years. In that scenario, no state or federal funds would be used to build that portion of the interstate.

The Transportation Reauthorization Bill also asks Congress to allocate \$1.5 billion just for the Texas portion of I-69, and requests an increase in the rate of return of gasoline tax to the state. Texas is a "donor state," which means only 88 cents of every dollar it sends to the federal government is ever returned. The bill is asking for an increased return rate of 95 percent.