

## Road to opportunity

*Kimball official sees tourism, trade growth along new freeway*

When many residents of the Twin Cities see dirt being shoved around east of Scottsbluff, they see the beginnings of a new highway bypass. When Deb Crago sees those bulldozers move, she sees new opportunities for Panhandle communities and families from Kimball to Chadron.

Crago, the economic development director in Kimball, recently attended a transportation conference in Canada and returned home excited about the possibilities for international trade that will come with development of a freeway corridor linking Canada to Mexico.

“Eighty-five percent of all the trade in Canada is done with the United States, and 90 percent of those goods are trucked,” she says. “In fact, the No. 1 male occupation in Canada is truck driver.”

Currently, most of those Canadian trucks pass through Minneapolis. The top three destinations for their cargo are California, Texas and Colorado. A new route linking Saskatoon to the Dakotas and points south — the route that will include the Heartland Expressway — will shorten the travel time for much of that cargo and send it through Scottsbluff and Kimball.

“A truck crosses the Canadian border every 2.5 seconds,” she says. “It opens up opportunities for the Panhandle that we’ve never seen before, because we’re on the way to their destinations.”

It might be awhile before we realize the benefits. Delays in federal funding for highway projects due to the slowing economy will set back completion of the project, and urban interests competing for the same funds make it hard for our lawmakers to keep the project on the front burner.

“It’s going to be hard to determine the value of this until it’s completed — and completed correctly, which probably means four-lane,” she says. That means future work for Nebraska on the route between Kimball and the Colorado border.

A “Ports to Plains” group is pushing for the southern portions of the route through Texas and Oklahoma. Major work is ahead in the Dakotas. But a key to the overall development of the route is Colorado, and that’s where advocates plan to campaign for support.

North-south truck traffic in Colorado passes on Interstate 25 through the heart of Denver, creating traffic jams and bottlenecks. Moving much of that traffic 50 miles or so east, onto a new freeway, would be good for the growing Front Range.

“It’s time we got some Colorado cities on board with this,” Crago says. “We need to start a new surge of public awareness.”

She'd like to see the sort of enthusiasm for the project that she saw in Canada, where 5 million people live in communities along the proposed route, and Canadian universities, trucking interests, other transportation businesses and public officials tout the benefits of developing a new truck route.

Nebraska's fastest-growing cities have been along Interstate 80, where trade and tourism opportunities abound. The new American freeway, which would pass Mount Rushmore and a dozen or so other parks and monuments, offers the best hope for revitalizing American communities on the eastern Plains.

By the Scottsbluff Star-Herald Editorial Board