

Ports-to-Plains Heralded as Investment in Future

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AUSTIN - A trade route with the potential to enhance the economic landscape of West Texas won designation from the Texas Transportation Commission on Thursday.

The Ports-to-Plains corridor has been a pet project of area elected officials for about four years, Lubbock Mayor Windy Sitton said. She called the vote a historic one for the state.

"What this does is it allows West Texas to develop all the way, up and down," she said, adding that the state commission should be commended for its desire to plan for the future and develop all of Texas.

The roadway, which eventually will become a four-lane divided highway, was added last year to the list of 43 high-priority corridors in the federal transportation bill.

"This route is an investment in our future," Texas Transportation Commission Chairman John Johnson said.

"It has a regional impact to the state's infrastructure and has the potential to serve as a crucial trade corridor for Texas and the rest of the country."

Congestion at border ports and along the Interstate 35 corridor is expected to be lessened with a strong western route, Sitton said.

"The sooner we can get started on this, the better the entire state is going to be," she said.

Ports-to-Plains will connect some existing roads, develop intersections and construct a few new portions. The estimated total cost - at least 10 years away - is about \$1.2 billion.

The 830-mile route approved - the southern corridor - begins with U.S. 87/287 in Dumas and travels to the Texas-Mexico border.

The northern segment of the Ports-to-Plains corridor, from Dumas to Denver, Colo., will be mutually selected by the transportation departments of Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

That portion of the roadway must be designated by Sept. 30 or the Federal Highway Administration will select a route.

Amarillo Mayor Trent Sisemore said he's excited about the designation and what it will mean to the area's future.

"I think the citizens of this community will truly realize its importance 20 years from today," he said. "I think the designation was exactly where it needed to be."

Sisemore said the northern segment likely will be more complicated to establish because it will be worked out with other states. However, he said he hopes the route will travel through the larger cities to increase trade opportunities.

Thanks and congratulations were scattered throughout the delegation. Sitton said the corridor could be as beneficial to the western region of the state as was the establishment of Texas Tech.

Economic development and job creation is vital to the growth of West Texas, which has experienced population losses and little growth, she said.

Designation of the Ports-to-Plains corridor will permit that region to be a major player in the development of Texas, Sitton said.

The corridor has made it this far with the help of officials along the route in both Texas and Mexico. In addition to the roomful of elected officials from West Texas, leaders from the Mexican city of Coahuila also were present to thank the commission for its Ports-to-Plains support.

Randy Neugebauer, who drafted the initial Ports-to-Plains plan with Sitton, credited Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, as being "quarterback" for the project, promoting the route at the capitals in both Austin and Washington.

U.S. Rep. Larry Combest and Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison have led the national charge. Last week, Combest secured \$2 million for Ports-to-Plains in the House Appropriations bill. If it stays in the budget, that money will establish a master plan for corridor management.

Having the corridor now designated, the next step will be to secure funding, Neugebauer said. The state's designation opens the project to matching federal funds.

Typically, matches would reflect an 80 percent to 20 percent split, with the federal government picking up the bulk of the tab.

Sitton said having Texans at the polls in November will be vital to gaining the needed cash for the project.

The Texas Mobility Fund will be on the ballot this year to enable the Texas Department of Transportation to issue bonds for building roads and financing smaller highway projects.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry has endorsed the measure as an important step to speeding up roadway construction.