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Style Publishing Group
P.O. Box 1676
Frisco, Texas 75034
Phone: 972.335.1181
Toll Free: 877.781.7067
Fax: 214.722.2313

E-mail: info@friscostyle.com
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The NAFTA Superhighway

By Kurt Neufang

GET READY. A new construction project is going to take place that will change the landscape of Texas and the entire country. No, it is not another park, building or residential community. This will be a Superhighway that will connect Canada, the United States and Mexico. The proposed “NAFTA Superhighway,” also referred to as the “Trans-Texas Corridor” (TTC) is coming. This Superhighway is planned to begin at Laredo, Texas, head north to Kansas City (through Oklahoma City) and ultimately connect to Duluth, Minnesota and traverse into Canada.

SOME HISTORY

Back in 1994 the North American Free

Trade Agreement (NAFTA) created a lot of attention with the promotion of cross-border trade. NAFTA sparked the formation of the North America’s Superhighway Coalition, Inc. (NASCO), which was tasked with attracting funding support for the I-35, NAFTA Superhighway. NASCO has been promoting the I-35 highway through Texas as one that will enhance international trade, expand the flow of goods and cut transportation costs. NASCO is a non-profit organization, whose mission statement says they are “dedicated to developing the world’s first international, integrated and secure, multi-modal transportation system along the international mid-continent

trade and transportation corridor to improve both the trade competitiveness and quality of life in North America.” To date, this group has received \$2.5 million in earmark funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) to plan this NAFTA Superhighway.

A development agreement was signed by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to build the “TTC-35” high priority corridor. This agreement was signed in 2005.

Governor Perry has been a supporter of the Superhighway project. Congress has contributed money to study the project impact and its practical implementation. This highway is a part of a comprehensive plan through a quasi-

governmental organization called the "Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America," or SPP. The SPP agreement was signed by President Bush, President Vicente Fox and Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin when they met in Waco on March 23, 2005.

An SPP office is located in the U.S. Department of Commerce and is tasked with creating the "regulatory reality" for security and prosperity within the confines for joint U.S., Mexican and Canadian transportation planning. Technology will play a key role. Innovative "SENTRI" travel lanes will be constructed. These lanes will provide screening and electronic checks of transported containers. The containers would then be subject to a physical check in Kansas City, Missouri. This SENTRI technology is very innovative, and will enhance the security of the goods transported.

An economic impact study was conducted for TxDOT by Ray Perryman and the Perryman Group of Waco. TxDOT commissioned the study to determine how the Texas economy will be affected by this new Superhighway. The report was titled, "Moving into Prosperity: The Potential Impact of the Trans-Texas Corridor on Business Activity in Texas."

Mr. Perryman noted that the Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC-35) will have a positive impact over time. He stated that the economic stimulus over the next 25 years of the TTC-35 project from Mexico to Oklahoma will provide \$1.4 trillion with 14.8 million in person-years of employment gained. Mr. Perryman's report also stated other economic impacts for the TTC-35 plan, which includes the long-term development of other corridors. Rail infrastructure and other projects were slated to increase the gross state product by \$665.9 billion, and personal income in Texas was projected to escalate by \$376 billion, generating approximately 3.7 million jobs.

Mr. Perryman's report discussed the 25-year forecast for traffic congestion and the need to increase capacity to handle the congestion growth. Mr. Perryman stated, "Congestion decreases safety and reduces economic efficiency." He has gone on record to say that "even using maximum reductions in agricultural

production from land used for the TTC-35, the annual benefits to farmers and ranchers from enhanced efficiency and development exceed the losses by a ratio of 39.4 to 1 in the TTC-35 Study Area."

CRITICS CONCERNS

Though this TxDOT study seems very positive, there are many groups concerned about the overall project and its social and economic impact.

Many have voiced concern that the NAFTA Superhighway would add significant air pollution, oil dependence, global warming and even increase road kill. In order to take a practical look at the potential impact of such a superhighway, let's look at the NAFTA effect on a common food product such as tomatoes. In a two-year period, NAFTA-induced U.S.-Mexico trade caused prices paid to Florida tomato farmers to drop to 22 percent.

On the highway of life, we most often recognize happiness out of the rear view mirror. – Frank Tyger

Meanwhile, the retail price on tomatoes rose three percent. The difference amounts to a 25 percent profit reaped by transnational corporations, rather than being passed on to the consumer. Many have seen that NAFTA has affected what is estimated to be 600,000 jobs lost to our neighbor to the south. A Superhighway (some believe) would only promulgate a further loss of economic opportunity, which goes against the premise of Mr. Perryman's report.

This planned new infrastructure of Mexico's cheap labor force with a brand new economic boost would make Mexico a continued attractive magnet for all manufacturers now remaining in the United States. Even those companies who wanted to keep their operations here might be enticed by cheaper competitors to join the exodus. The United States, until very recently the

manufacturing capital of the world, may continue a downward trend toward increasing dangerous dependence on foreign manufacturers for almost everything. The resulting inflation makes everything more expensive, devastating much of working America.

It is the opinion of many that if the NAFTA Superhighway goes through as planned, millions of Americans could expect to pay a high cost. As was noted, the NAFTA trade policies have driven millions of jobs out of the United States and the NAFTA Superhighway may accelerate more jobs to be lost. Although the Superhighway corridors are being sold locally as projects to ease congestion and facilitate U.S. economic competitiveness, their main purpose, very clearly, is to create an arterial network for speeding the delivery of manufactured products into the United States from Canada and Mexico.

An additional concern is the fact that millions of acres of land will be scheduled to be paved over, and that means that eminent domain to condemn lots of private property for the Superhighway corridors and rights-of-way will be unavoidable.

However, development that springs up within and around the Superhighway corridor will bring in greater tax revenues than undeveloped property. TxDOT has made it known that it will work to minimize the impact on the individual landowner. TxDOT has stated that the reconnecting of severed roads, the provision of crossovers and constructing limited access roads will be done wherever possible. TxDOT has also gone on record to note that they can only acquire property for transportation facilities that directly benefit users of the corridor. TxDOT cannot acquire property adjacent to the corridor for non-transportation related purposes.

On September 28, 2006, TxDOT unveiled a new Master Development Plan for the TTC-35 project. This plan took 16 months to complete. The first phase of the TTC-35 construction would include a connection to Interstate 35 south of San Antonio and a large loop around the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The report stated that the construction could begin by 2011, if all the environmental clearances are completed and the federal funding is

approved. This Master Plan envisions a parallel alternative toll road to I-35 that is to be funded by the private sector.

Public input to this process has been continually sought. The environmental process in particular needs to be in concert with the planning process. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has encouraged public/private partnerships to be part of this project. It is anticipated that private investment could be worth \$8.8 billion. Also, concession fees to the state for other transportation projects could entail an additional \$1.9 billion.

THE FRISCO CONNECTION

The North Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) is the metropolitan planning organization that is a voluntary association of, by and for local governments in the North Central Texas region. This organization was originally established “to assist local governments in planning for common needs, cooperating for mutual benefit, and coordinating for sound regional development.” Transportation planning is an important aspect of their regional mission.

NCTCOG serves a 16-county region of North Central Texas, which is centered on the urban centers of Dallas and Fort Worth. NCTCOG has over 230 member governments including all 16 counties, numerous cities, school districts and special districts. The Frisco community is a key part of their regional planning model.

Mike Sims is a Senior Program Manager in the Transportation Planning office of the NCTCOG and he offered some very interesting insights.

“By the year 2030, the region (Dallas-Fort Worth) will need a new regional outer loop to accommodate traffic growth and demand.” He went on to say that “facilities are more important than the financing mechanism. However, the TTC-35 project will help the regional initiatives that are already in the planning stages.”

Specifically, the Frisco community has been active with the planning of the outer loop alignment, known as the Denton-Collin connector. Mr. Sims said that “Collin County Commissioner Jack Hatchell has been a great regional steward in recognizing and supporting



photo from dreamstime.com

this planning process.” The Denton-Collin connector would extend north of Denton and connect to I-75 north of McKinney. This loop would not include a freight rail corridor and would cross on the north end of Prosper, thus, bypassing Frisco.

Mr. Sims provided a position paper adopted by the Regional Transportation Council. The needs identified in this document are very interesting. For instance, the projected population growth and subsequent traffic demand in the 10 core county Metroplex (Dallas, Tarrant, Collin, Denton, Johnson, Ellis, Rockwall, Parker, Kaufman and Wise) is expected to grow from 5.1 million in 2000 to 10 million in 2040.

Mr. Sims stated that “the regional proposal supports a TTC-35 corridor that is up to 1,200 feet wide.” He noted that “a focus of this project to the region is to

take traffic out of the congestion areas in the heart of the Metroplex.”

To put this in perspective, this total project involves a Superhighway (from Texas to Minnesota) that would extend 4,000 miles of a highway-railway and utility super corridor. It is slated to be constructed throughout Texas over the next 50 years.

The Superhighway will be built where transportation demand warrants. Obviously there will be continued growth in the Frisco area of Collin County, and local residents need to be well-informed of the transportation planning process. The affects of the Superhighway model will have a significant impact on the economic and social fiber of the region, the state and armadillo’s everywhere.

Kurt Neufang is a freelance writer formerly of Frisco currently living in Chapel Hill, NC.