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News

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Category: **Associated Press**

Hutchison announces funding for I-69

By **LYNN BREZOSKY** (Associated Press Writer)
 The Associated Press

Web Posted : 12/15/2003 6:08 PM

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison announced \$7.4 million in federal funding Monday for Interstate 69, a highway in progress that planners hope will someday stretch from Mexico to Canada and provide an economic boost to South Texas.

"It's a real win for us, much more than we thought we could get when we went in," Hutchison said, flanked by state Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville, and U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin.

The money is part of next year's Senate Transportation, Treasury and General Government Appropriations bill and would pay for environmental impact studies for the route, which ultimately will cost at least \$1 billion for the Texas portion alone.

The House approved the money when it passed a sweeping government spending bill last week. The Senate will take up that same bill when it returns Jan. 20.

For years, leaders in the Valley area have complained about a lack of progress on I-69 and said the highway would bring economic prosperity to cities along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Historically, the region has been one of the most economically depressed areas of the U.S. but has boomed since the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement.

Census figures show the McAllen area is the fourth fastest-growing in the U.S. and retail giants such as Wal-Mart and Dillard's said some of their best performing stores are in the region.

Much of the growth is attributed to maquilas, U.S.-owned factories just south of the border. Several U.S. auto makers use Mexican laborers to produce components which are then shipped to U.S. factories for final assembly.

Currently, I-69 starts along the Canadian border at Port Huron, Mich. and runs south to Indianapolis.

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Planners propose extending it from Indianapolis to Evansville, Ind., through Kentucky to Memphis, Tenn., then along the Arkansas-Mississippi line to Shreveport, La. From there it would go on to Houston and South Texas to the Mexican border.

There are two proposed routes through South Texas.

One would expand existing U.S. Highway 77, which hugs the Gulf Coast to Corpus Christi, before heading south to the border. The other would go take a more westward route before heading south from San Antonio to McAllen along U.S. 281.

Border crossing ports from Laredo to Brownsville handle 49 percent of all U.S. truck-borne trade with Mexico. Crossing ports in Michigan, meanwhile, handle 47 percent of U.S. truck-borne trade with Canada.

Planners say the project could be completed as early as 2012.

Emilio Santos, president of the McAllen-based Association of Importers & Exporters of Texas, said the project would at long last put the Valley on the map for international business.

"I-69 places the Valley not only in Texas but on a national map, an international map," he said. "We are now recognized as an area that commercial traffic and business traffic is a part of."

12/15/2003

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