

Interstate 49: Origin, Planning, Construction

Interstate 49 had its inception in the 1970s when business leaders and highway officials in Missouri, Arkansas and Louisiana began discussing the need for a new north-south interstate through the center of the United States.

The new interstate would connect south-central Canada and the Gulf Coast in southern Louisiana and generate economic and safety benefits in every state along the way.

The goal was less congestion to improve the flow of goods and people and attract more commerce from businesses seeking to locate or expand in communities with an interstate highway nearby. With access only at interchanges and no more at-grade intersections, driving would be safer.

In the mid-1970s, the Federal Highway Administration approved an interstate highway in western Louisiana to connect I-10 at Lafayette and I-20 at Shreveport, a distance of 212 miles. Construction in Louisiana began in the early 1980s and was completed in 1996. The first 32-mile segment of that 212 miles was completed in 1984 and became the first stretch of I-49 in the nation.

In the meantime, Missouri and Arkansas officials were working to improve the U.S. 71 corridor to eventually achieve interstate highway standards.

Arkansas built several segments, including what is known as I-540 between Bentonville and Fort Smith, which was opened to traffic in 1999.

Starting in the 1970s, Missouri began the process of four-laning U.S. 71 south of Nevada, Mo. Into the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, projects included building four-lane freeway sections of U.S. 71 through Barton, Jasper, Newton and McDonald counties.

Also in the 2000s, projects were built to upgrade the existing four-lane highway where needed north of Joplin through the Harrisonville area just south of Kansas City.

All upgrades, including construction of new interchanges, overpasses and outer roads and elimination of all at-grade intersections, were completed by December 2012, with formal designation of I-49 in Missouri on Dec. 12, 2012.

From the mid-1970s through 2012, the design and construction work leading up to transforming U.S. 71 to I-49 in southwest Missouri was led in turn by District Engineers Joe Mickes, Ken Stalcup, Richard Walter and Becky Baltz.

Naming of Interstate 49

Some thought the new interstate along U.S. 71 south of Kansas City should be an extension of I-29 which runs north of Kansas City through Iowa, South Dakota and North Dakota. However, that's where the interstate highway "naming" convention came into play.

North-south interstate highways in the U.S. are given odd numbers and go from smaller to larger numbers west to east. (Even numbered interstate highways go from smaller numbers in the south to larger numbers in the north.)

I-29 north of Kansas City falls between I-25 to the west and I-35 to the east.

South of Kansas City, I-35 angles southwest through Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas and I-55 lies to the east. That makes I-49 an appropriate design-



nation in between.

Signs along I-49 will still carry the U.S. 71 shield. That's because U.S. 71 in Missouri has not been relocated and is still part of the national U.S. 71 corridor that also runs through Iowa and Minnesota to the north and through Arkansas, a sliver in Texas and Louisiana to the south.



Validation and Impetus for I-49

A new interstate highway corridor between Kansas City and New Orleans, essentially extending what was already being built in central Louisiana, was enacted by the United States Congress in 1991. The corridor was listed as a high priority in federal highway legislation – the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 – and later specified as I-49.

By 2002, a group of business and community leaders in Louisiana, Arkansas and Missouri formed the I-49 International Coalition to keep awareness high in all three states, to lobby for congressional funding and to explore other funding options. Those leaders meant to keep I-49 moving forward.

An I-49 caucus was formed in the U.S. House of Representatives and met for the first time in 2003. The coalition consisted of House members from Missouri, Arkansas and Louisiana, including then-Reps. Roy Blunt and Karen McCarthy of Missouri, John Boozman and Mike Ross of Arkansas and Billy Tauzin and Christopher John of Louisiana.

Supporters foresaw that eventually I-49 and I-29 would constitute a seamless freeway link of 1,630 miles across six states -- Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, South Dakota and North Dakota. It would connect New Orleans-area Gulf Coast ports to Winnipeg, Canada, which lies 90 miles north of the U.S.-Canadian border. Winnipeg is a hub in central Canada for the transportation, agriculture, mining, forestry and energy industries.

Advocates understood that I-49 in southwest Missouri, Arkansas and Louisiana would intersect increasingly vital east-west interstates -- I-44 at Joplin, Mo., I-40 at Fort Smith, Ark., I-30 at Texarkana, Ark., I-20 at Shreveport, La., and I-10 at Lafayette, La.

Ongoing I-49 Construction

From the beginning of the effort to develop and build I-49, the four-lane projects undertaken in Louisiana, Arkansas and Missouri were built to interstate standards.

Louisiana has spent \$1.5 billion on I-49-related projects. Work continues on \$5.6 billion worth of projects between Lafayette and New Orleans in the south and between Shreveport and the Arkansas state line in the north.

In Arkansas, \$1.2 billion in I-49-related projects are completed. Another \$2.8 billion in projects are coming, including a challenging 180-mile long stretch through the Ouachita Mountains between Fort Smith and Texarkana.

Arkansas officials also are moving to build what is known as the Bella Vista Bypass, starting first with a two-lane road. When Arkansas four-lanes the Bella Vista Bypass in the future, Missouri will complete its final five-mile portion of four-lane and connect to I-49 where it now ends at Pineville. (As of December 2012, Missouri has completed 180 miles of its 185-mile long portion of I-49.)

In Missouri, \$300 million has been spend on I-49-related projects since 1994. Missouri still must complete its portion of the Bella Vista Bypass at a cost of about \$50 million. Missouri also has future plans to build a new directional interchange at Route 171 that will cost nearly \$50 million (but it is

not required for I-49 designation).

In all, using expenditures already made and estimates for future projects based on 2012 dollars, the cost to complete I-49 in Missouri, Arkansas and Louisiana will come to \$11.5 billion. That includes \$7.1 billion in Louisiana, \$4 billion in Arkansas and \$400 million in Missouri.



I-49 Takes Shape in Missouri

The final big push to convert 185 miles of U.S. 71 to I-49 in Missouri began in the 1990s after the 1991 highway legislation was enacted by Congress.

Projects included completing new four-lane sections south of Joplin. Other projects required going back along the corridor north of Joplin where U.S. 71 was already four-laned to add more interchanges, overpasses and outer roads and to eliminate at-grade intersections.

Here's a summary of projects in Missouri starting in 1994 and leading to I-49 designation in 2012:

- ◆ McDonald County (2004-2012) -- 4-lanning, with 5 interchanges and 5 overpasses.
- ◆ Newton County (1994-2001) – 4-laning, with 9 interchanges and 8 overpasses.
- ◆ Jasper County (2005-2009) – 5 interchanges and 2 overpasses.
- ◆ Barton County (2010-2011) – 3 interchanges and 1 overpass.
- ◆ Vernon County (2011-2012) – 5 interchanges and 2 overpasses.
- ◆ Bates County (2010-2012) – 2 interchanges and 2 outer roads.
- ◆ Cass County (2012) – 1 interchange and 2 overpasses.
- ◆ Jackson County – No additional work needed.

Interstate 49 in Missouri, with Federal Highway Administration approval, becomes official Dec. 12, 2012.

Sources of Information

To find out more about the development of Interstate 49 and the Interstate Highway System in general:

- ◆ Federal Highway Administration: fhwa.dot.gov
- ◆ American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials: transportation.org
- ◆ Transportation Research Board: trb.org
- ◆ U.S. Chamber of Commerce: uschamber.com
- ◆ American Trucking Associations: trucking.org
- ◆ Missouri Department of Transportation: modot.org
- ◆ Arkansas Department of Transportation: arkansashighways.com
- ◆ Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development: dotd.louisiana.gov
- ◆ I-49 International Coalition: interstate49.org