

What Will It Take to Complete I-69?

Studies and plans are done, but the highway remains miles from reality

By Jim Beauez

The interstate highway system has aided economic growth and commerce across the U.S. since its creation 60 years ago. Federal Highway Administration estimates place the impact at 7,900 full-time jobs for every \$1 billion invested in highway construction.

That's exactly what leaders along the I-69 corridor, a proposed 2,680-mile stretch of roadway that will eventually connect the U.S. borders in Texas and Michigan, by way of the Mississippi Delta, have hoped would happen.

Yet, 17 years after construction began, the roadway remains a disjointed, patchwork of connector routes and unfunded plans—especially in the Delta.

"It's probably the one thing that overnight could bring an economic resurgence to the Delta," says Dick Hall, chairman of the Mississippi Transportation Commission. "If we can put an interstate highway through the heart of the Delta, that's going to do tremendous things for their economy."

Delays in environmental impact studies and negotiations, as well as right-of-way access, have hampered efforts in several states throughout the corridor. Nothing, however, has blocked its completion as much as the lack of funding.

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Transportation named I-69 one of six "Corridors of the Future," part of a federal initiative to develop multi-state corridors to help reduce congestion. Funding for implementation plans followed, with \$21.8 million going to I-95 along the East Coast, and \$15 million each for Western routes like I-5 and I-15. The nascent I-69 project received \$800,000.

Plans for Mississippi's portion of I-69 include 178 miles of roadway from the proposed Great River Bridge in Bolivar County, past Delta population centers Cleveland and Clarksdale, and through the existing I-269 spur in Tunica County. To date, 43 miles are complete and 22 miles are under construction in DeSoto and Marshall counties. The remaining, unfunded 113 miles will run through the heart of the Delta.

Last year Congress passed, and President Obama signed, the FAST Act—Fixing America's Surface Transportation—to improve surface transportation systems across the country over five years. That authorization includes level funding for Mississippi of \$2.5 billion, but does not include the funding needed to complete projects such as I-69. MDOT estimates the unfunded portions will cost more than \$1.8 billion.

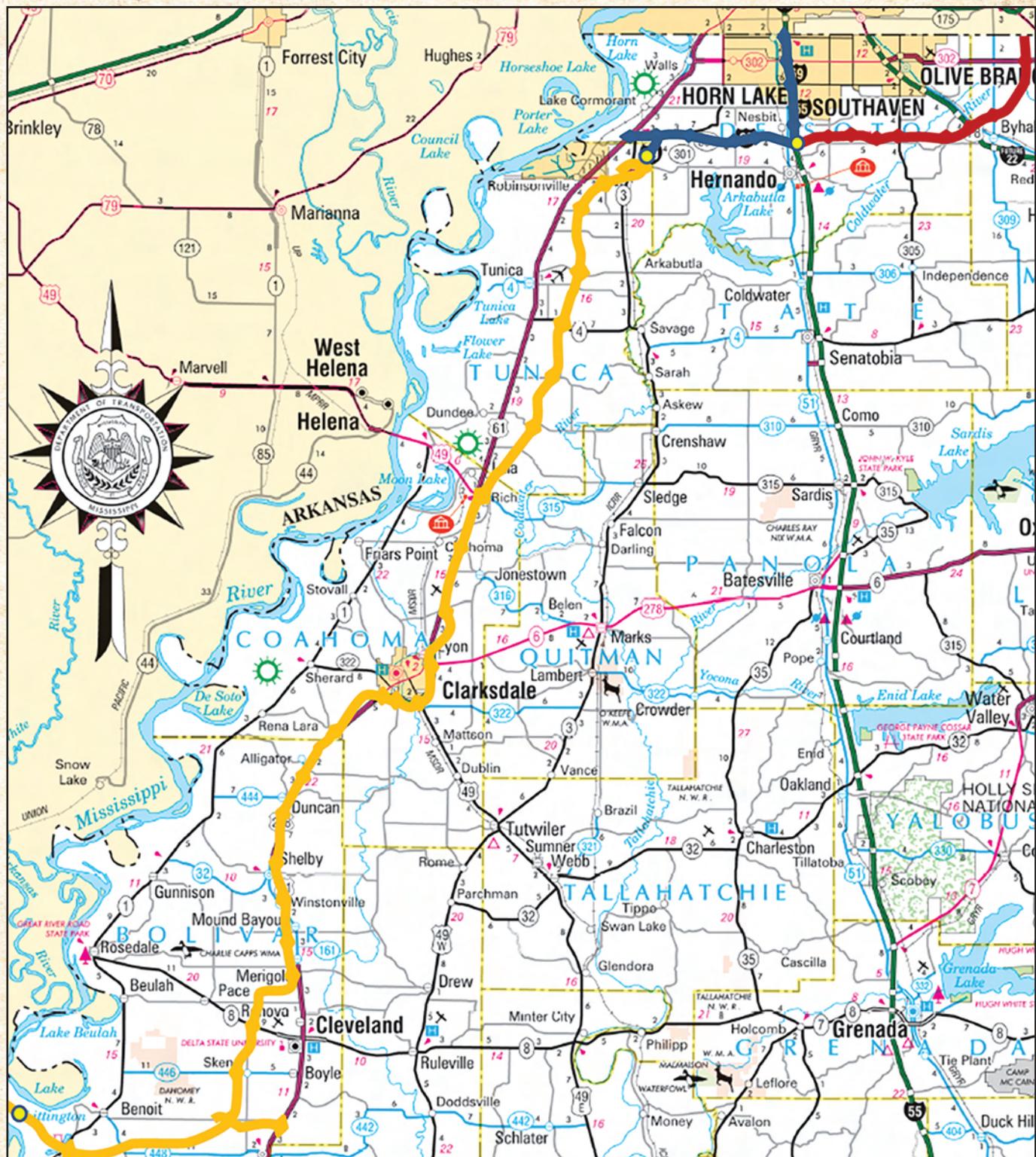
"That legislation gives us a five-year plan, which we haven't had from Congress in ten years now, so at least in five years we know about how much money is coming," says Hall. "The bad news is: there's no new money coming, and there's no significant funding for I-69. We're right back where we've been."

Hall maintains that there's no will for infrastructure funding, either in Congress or the Mississippi Legislature. Along with leaders including Miss District 113 Senator Willie Simmons and members of the I-69 National Coalition, Hall has traveled to Washington to impress upon leaders the importance of the project for one of the nation's historically impoverished areas.

Although scattered funding arrived in previous years, Hall says there has "never been a big pot of money" for the project, and once the possibility of federal earmarks went away, the state resorted to issuing bonds to support the project that it repaid from the state gasoline tax, which hasn't increased since 1987. Completing the I-269 portion will take another \$156 million, said Hall, and that will be accomplished through more bonds.

"Here in the state, we spend hundreds of millions of dollars trying to attract some industry, and this project would be a tremendous economic boon to be constructed," says Hall. "It would take thousands of construction workers and the use of concrete and asphalt and steel and machinery."

Judson Thigpen, executive director of the Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce, says that the immediate job opportunities created by an I-69 project would be welcomed, not to mention the manufacturing or logistics industry that could follow



in its wake. But for now, the focus is on retaining the existing industry and workforce initiatives that would help locals fill the jobs when the project is funded.

"The companies aren't going to come here if you don't have the workforce—that's the number one thing," says Thigpen. "Transportation and that interstate would be way up on the list, but if you don't have the people who can fill the jobs, they're still not going to look. That's something we're continuing to work on."

"We're not in a planning mode yet for I-69. It's on the horizon, but with the price tag that's on it, we think realistically it will be a number of years before it's built. We are trying to do things to improve ourselves where we are now," he continues.

Adds Hall, "Education is the final answer for the Delta, but that's generations. This highway needs to be built now, and can be." **DBJ**