Federal SAFETEA - LU monies for local projects

With the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) legislation President Bush signed into law on August 10, 2005, Northwest Louisiana stands to receive substantial funding for numerous projects ranging from completion of Interstate 49 north to congestion relief and streetscaping.

Louisiana received $200 million from the federal government for completion of the northern sections of Interstate 49. Combined with the $15 million secured from the state in House Bill 654 – The Unclaimed Properties Bill, Northwest Louisiana will see the interstate completed in the next fifteen years.

Interstate 69 Section of Independent Utility 15 (IUS 15), which runs between Interstate 20 near Haughton to U.S. Highway 171 near Stonewall, received $2.5 million and Bossier Parish’s Congestion Relief Project got a boost of $3.9 million. The Red River Wildlife Refuge received $3.25 million for construction of its visitor’s center.

Across the river in Caddo Parish, Shreveport received funding for the Intelligent Transportation Systems ($1.5 million), the Intermodal Facility ($2.4 million), and streetscaping projects ($847,500).

Overall, NLCOG will receive at least 25 percent increase in overall planning funds. Nationwide, the National Corridor Infrastructure Program received $1.7 billion and the National and Regional Significance was given $1.77 billion.

Proposed I-49 North Project Timeline

April 7, 2005, brought applause and cheers from many elected officials, I-49 activists, and citizens of northwest Louisiana. It was at that time Louisiana officially celebrated the groundbreaking for the first 3.3 mile segment of Interstate 49 North near Mira, Louisiana.

Now, just barely four months later, northwest Louisiana is again celebrating a milestone for the I-49 North project—the proposed timeline for completion of the various projects that together create the interstate.

In as little as 5 years, citizens in and around Louisiana will begin driving on the road in north Caddo Parish. The segment from the Arkansas state line to just south of Houston should be “ready to roll” by 2010.

By 2010, the segment from Interstate 220 to Martin Luther King Drive should also be ready for traffic.

The right of way acquisitions for the segment of I-49 between state Highway 173 and U.S. Highway 71 should be completed by 2011. Along the same time frame, embankments for the section of interstate between Martin Luther King Drive and state Highway 173 should be completed and ready to move to the next phase.

Job Access Transit Study Update

At the July 7, 2005, meeting of the Metropolitan Planning Organization – Transportation Policy Committee, Mrs. Sharon Swanson, Project Manager for Morgan, Hill, Sutton & Mitchell Architects (MHSM), presented the committee members with the report for Task 4 of the Job Access – Reverse Commute Transit Study.

Various incentives, including tax breaks through the Community Choice Program, give area employers the opportunity to recoup some of the costs associated with extending transportation help to their employees. Employees can also benefit from the options in the Commuter Choice Program.

Among the goals outlined in the Task 4 Report was the establishment of a central transportation bureau. This agency would be a clearinghouse for transportation information including the delivery of service to area residents and training. Other goals included maintaining current information on the transportation providers, identifying new service opportunities, promoting existing incentives to public transit, and maintaining community input.

The Task 4 Report discussed several recommendations for addressing the gap in transportation services. The options include undertaking an expansion of the current fixed-route network with Night Owl Service and a Guaranteed Ride-to-Work program.

With the Night Owl Service, two options for the routes were drawn up—one by MHSM and another by the staff at SporTran. Both options serve the casino and riverfront districts, medical/hospital clusters, and major retail corridor, as well as the higher education and training institutions in the Northwest Louisiana.

The first option, from MHSM, based the operations at the proposed Murphy Street Transfer Center. Evening service routes were designed to stay on the major thoroughfares, i.e. Youree Drive, Line Avenue, etc. The perceived notion of safety on major, well-lighted roadways was the basis for this option which is estimated to cost $506,500 annually.

SporTran staff provided an alternate Night Owl Service option that provides additional service into the at-need residential neighborhoods as well as the major employment centers. The base of operation would remain at the Downtown Shreveport Transit Terminal. Option two’s estimated annual cost is $605,400.

Also recommended was a Guaranteed Ride-to-Work program to be used in conjunction with the proposed Night Owl Service. This would be a supplemental program and would not replace the existing transit service or proposed transit changes.

For additional information regarding the Task 4 Report, or to obtain a copy of any of the Task Reports, please contact NLCOG at (318) 841-5950. The reports are also available in PDF format on MHSM’s website www.mhsarchitects.com.

Roundtable discussion with Congressman McCrery

On May 26, 2005, Congressman Jim McCrery joined the Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments and several representatives from the community to discuss assets Northwest Louisiana enjoys and the challenges the region faces.

Among the local representatives in attendance were Gary D. Rockett, Executive Director of the Greater Bossier Economic Development Foundation; Dr. Phillip Rozeman, Cardiologist from Willis-Knighton Medical Center; Mac Mccarter, Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal; Tom Watts, Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal; Eric England, Acting Port Director for the Port of Shreveport-Bossier; Tom Carleton, Chancellor of Bossier Parish Community College; and Mrs. Wendy Benscoter, an Independent Strategic Consultant.

Among the topics discussed during the roundtable was the economic development of both Bossier City and Shreveport by way of bringing in new businesses and helping local, established businesses to expand. Revitalization of blighted communities and access to healthcare and education were also important topics during the conversation.
From the Executive Director

The Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments wants to thank each of the following officials for their support in passing the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) and Louisiana House Bill 654: The Unclaimed Properties Bill. These pieces of legislation will provide the much needed funding for several projects in Northwest Louisiana.

Thank You to Congressman McCrery and Senator Vitter in securing $200 million for the I-49 North project. This project has been a priority for this area for some time. With your leadership, I-49 North will soon become a reality and the state of Louisiana will have a true North-South Interstate

Thank You to Congressman McCrery and Senator Landrieu in obtaining funds for the many other needs in Northwest Louisiana. Funding for the Bossier Parish Congestion Relief Program, the Shreveport Regional ITS System, and the proposed Intermodal Center will have a tremendous impact on the region’s transportation systems.

Thank You to Governor Blanco, Treasurer Kennedy, Representative Montgomery and Senator Jackson for House Bill 654. This truly innovative financing mechanism was vital in securing the federal funds for I-49 North. Without a doubt, the level of federal funding we obtained would not have come to pass without this commitment from the state.

It is through hard work and dedication of leaders such as yourselves that Northwest Louisiana will be able to grow and prosper in the coming decades. For all you have done, in the words of our friend Al Kessler:

Thank You! Thank You! Thank You!

Sincerely,

J. Kent Rogers, Executive Director

On Friday, August 12, 2005, federal, state and local elected officials and local advocates for Interstate 49 gathered to celebrate the long-awaited light at the end of the tunnel for the connection of I-49 with Arkansas.

With an enthusiastic round of applause, Gov. Kathleen Blanco officially signed House Bill 654 which supplies $15 million annually for the required state funds for I-49 north.

State Treasurer John Kennedy’s “innovative idea” of using the state’s unclaimed property fund helped secure the federal funding needed to extend the interstate by showing Louisiana’s commitment to putting up its share of funding.

“I’m looking forward in a few years to standing on a slab of completed Louisiana interstate to welcome our neighbors from Arkansas as they open the last stretch on their side of I-49,” Blanco said. “That will be a memorable day: a day of celebration, the mark of a great beginning.”

Blanco commended the teamwork and cooperation of everyone involved in obtaining the necessary state and federal funding for I-49, including Senators Mary Landrieu and David Vitter, U.S. Congressman Jim McCrery, state Senator Lydia Jackson and state Representative Billy Montgomery, the I-49 Coalition, and other local officials and advocates.

“This project is about what we can achieve when we connect to each other,” said Senator Jackson.

The day’s celebration continued with Congressman McCrery and Senator Vitter presenting Gov. Blanco with an oversized check for the $200 million secured in the federal transportation bill for road work for I-49 north.

While the celebrated money from state and federal resources is still about $100 million short to fully construct I-49 north, it is an important step on the road to opening all of Louisiana to not only economic development, but also to tourism and other industries.

Friday’s ceremony “marks the knowledge this is going to happen,” Congressman McCrery said. “It’s no longer in doubt.”