

State highways get federal boost

Bill will help improve, widen roads in the Heartland Express

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WASHINGTON — When President Bush signed a bill authorizing \$286 billion for improving the nation's roads and transit Wednesday, he also settled a 14-year disagreement about which Colorado highways should receive federal funding as part of a major trade route called the Heartland Express.

The Heartland Express connects highways in Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and South Dakota and links up with the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor and the Theodore Roosevelt Expressway. Together, they constitute part of the Great Plains International Trade Corridor, which runs from Mexico to Canada. But when the Heartland Express was designated through a transportation bill 14 years ago, the route was unclear.

"When it was designated, it just said Rapid City to Denver via Scotts Bluff, Nebraska," said Joe Kiely, vice president of the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor. "Everybody and their uncles on the northern end had a picture of what that

should be."

In March Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., and Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., introduced legislation as part of the transportation bill that clearly defined Colorado's portion of the Heartland Express based on a 2003 study that looked at freight movement in the state. It will provide better access to Denver and Colorado Springs.

When the president signed the bill, he authorized \$5 million for improvements to the area the delegates defined — Colo. 71 from the Nebraska state line to Limon, and Interstate 76 from Denver to Brush.

"The Heartland Express trade route is of great importance to eastern Colorado," said Allard. "The route will facilitate trade and tourism, bringing additional dollars to the Eastern Plains."

The state will use federal money to widen the highways in the next five years and intends, if further federal funding is provided, to turn the two-lane roads into a four-lane divided highway in the next 30 years, Kiely said. Much of the money will go immediately to I-76 for reconstruction, where it is much needed, he added.

The Department of Transportation estimates 2.5 million people will benefit from the Heartland trade corridor, which also will directly connect 21 national parks, monuments and historic sites. Jim Reis, president of the World Trade Center in Denver, said better highways will make the state more accessible for trade and could increase business in rural areas as truckers stop for food and accommodations.

"The nation benefits from

completion of this international trade corridor with prices for goods and services, as well as access to more markets for our domestic products," Musgrave said. "My district will benefit from the economic development, improved infrastructure and added jobs."

Even with money from the transportation bill, Diane Koller, federal government liaison for the Colorado Department of Transportation, said she fears dwindling state funds

will make it hard to finish the project. According to the department, completion will cost \$664 million.

In addition to the Heartland Express money, Allard secured a 46 percent increase in highway funding for Colorado that will total more than \$2.45 billion dollars in the next five years and more than \$110 million for specific highway projects. Northern and eastern Colorado will receive \$8 million to reconstruct parts of Interstate 25, more than \$6 million to reconstruct portions of Colo. 287 and more than \$6 million to reconstruct portions of I-76.

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