



## City leaders, businesses await upgrade of U.S. 71 to I-49

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LAMAR, Mo. — John Moore's business, the Blue Top Restaurant in Lamar, has thrived in its location by U.S. Highway 71.

"We have been here on the corner for 29 years, as long as I have owned it," Moore said. "We get a lot of our business from the highway now. It's so close to us."

If U.S. 71 is upgraded into a full interstate, then Lamar, Nevada and other cities along the highway would reap benefits.

Lynn Calton, Lamar city administrator, said the designation would help economic development and improve safety.

"We have been part of a regional effort to get 71 changed to an interstate," Calton said. "If we have an interstate, it will help economic development, and the road will be safer."

Proposed I-49

The Missouri Department of Transportation is proposing to upgrade U.S. 71 between Kansas City and Joplin to interstate status. The proposed transformation calls for 11 non-ramped intersections, such as that at Missouri Highway 126 in Barton County, to be upgraded with ramps and acceleration lanes. Nearby, non-ramped intersections would be closed.

Calton said the intersection closures would make the highway safer.

"There have been a few fatality accidents north and south of us," he said. "Interstates are generally safer because they separate all those crossings."

Other proposed changes include bigger signs and some new outer roads near closed interchanges.

The most notable change would be the new designation: Interstate 49.

"The road would look similar to I-44," said Becky Baltz, MoDOT district engineer. "It would have wider road stripes, bigger signs and reference markers."

U.S. 71 already has four lanes and shoulders. The current median is so wide, Baltz said, that engineers may decide not to install a cable in the median as they did to prevent crossover crashes on Interstate 44.

Highway 71 already meets interstate standards from northern Jasper County to Pineville.

MoDOT officials have conducted informational meetings in Butler and Nevada about the possible transformation. The last of three meetings is set for 7 p.m. today in Lamar's Thiebaud Auditorium.

Baltz said MoDOT estimates that the full upgrade for U.S. 71 would cost \$200 million. Federal funds would pay 80 percent of that; the state would pay the remaining 20 percent.

But the project has not yet been finalized. Originally, MoDOT was going to use the funds on its share of a proposed Bella Vista bypass, but when the state of Arkansas couldn't commit to the project, MoDOT wanted to invest in the northern stretch, Baltz said.

"We still wanted to make good use of the money, so we decided to work farther north," Baltz said. "This work would have to be done anyway."

The ultimate goal of the project would be to establish an interstate highway connecting Kansas City with New Orleans. The existing I-49 starts at New Orleans and runs west, then north to Shreveport in northeastern Louisiana.

A timeline for the project has not yet been set. Baltz said Arkansas may yet find a way to fund its share of the Bella Vista bypass.

“We are trying to stay flexible,” Baltz said. “If Arkansas was able to come up with the funding before we start on the northern part, then we could possibly do that.”

Economic boosts

Baltz said U.S. 71 handles about 17,000 trips a day. An interstate highway would increase that count to about 23,000 by 2028, MoDOT estimates.

Calton said the city’s two main manufacturers, Epoch Composite Products and Thorco Industries, would benefit from an upgrade because it would allow easier access for trucks. And, he said, an interstate could attract even more manufacturers to town.

“It makes recruiting potential employers easier,” Calton said. “We have been saying that we have a four-lane, north-south highway that will hopefully be I-49. Now, we can tell them that it’s going to get done.”

Thorco has plants in Lamar, Nevada and Butler, which all are along U.S. 71.

Randy Early, a spokesman for Thorco, declined to comment about the upgrade, saying the company didn’t “want to get involved.”

Ron Cook, a spokesman for Tamko Building Products, the parent of Epoch, said the matter is “not something we had a response to.”

Calton said Lamar could use more businesses, especially since the closure of the O’Sullivan Industries plant last year.

Business owners in other sectors also favor the upgrade.

Moore said his customers at the Blue Top are a mix of local residents and highway travelers. If an interstate increases traffic and brings in a new employer, that would mean more customers, he said.

Julie Moore, a co-owner of LaMarti’s convenience store in Lamar, said her business also would prosper.

“About 90 percent of our business comes from the highway,” she said. “When we lost O’Sullivan, we lost quite a bit of diesel sales from those trucks.”

Officials in Jasper and Nevada also are anticipating the transformation.

Jasper is developing a growth plan based on the possibility of an interstate. Mayor Paul “Dusty” Nelson said the city is looking into an industrial park and commercial zone near the highway, and working to upgrade city water services.

“We have been thinking about this for five to seven years,” Nelson said. “I’m glad to see it coming now. This is a shot in the arm — and maybe survival.”

Bill McGuire, Nevada city manager, said the city and business leaders are exploring ways to market the city’s central location between Joplin and Kansas City.

“If this is the major north-south route from New Orleans to Minnesota, that can’t be bad,”

McGuire said. “What we want to do is attract the traffic off the highway as it goes through Nevada.”

### **Intersections**

As the proposed 11 interchanges are built along U.S. Highway 71, nearby, non-ramped interchanges would be closed.

Lori Marble, spokeswoman for MoDOT, said none of those closures would be in Jasper County. Barton County and Vernon County each would lose 10 such intersections.

According to preliminary plans, outer roads would be constructed in Vernon County but not in Barton County

