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Government to Build Two New Highways in Northern Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

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On Jan. 11, the Communications and Transportation Secretariat (Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transporte, SCT) announced plans to construct two new highways in northern Mexico over the next several years as part of plans to meet the infrastructure needs created by implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

According to SCT and Coahuila state officials, the first priority is to complete a modern 600-kilometer highway connecting the industrial cities of Saltillo and Monclova with Piedras Negras, which borders Eagle Pass, Texas. Completion has been targeted for 1998. The new highway which will basically follow an existing route on highway 57 is expected to serve as an alternative to the busy north-south route connecting Laredo, Texas, with Monterrey.

In addition, an extension to the new highway will be constructed south of Piedras Negras to nearby Ciudad Acuna, which borders Del Rio, Texas. The thoroughfare will connect at Monclova with a planned east-west highway connecting the northern industrial cities of Monterrey and Chihuahua.

No timetable announced

The SCT did not announce the timetable for completion of the east-west highway, which will cut across the Coahuila Desert. In conjunction with the construction in Coahuila, the state of Texas and the US government are investing in improvements to a route connecting US Interstate 35 with Eagle Pass. Antonio Karam Macisse, public works secretary for Coahuila state, said the new Piedras Negras-Saltillo route will also coincide with the construction of a second border-crossing bridge at Piedras Negras-Eagle Pass.

According to Karam, public financing will be used for the highway construction in order to avoid having to introduce a toll-based system. In fact, on Jan. 18, the SCT announced plans to issue a US \$500 million bond on international markets to finance highway construction during 1994. During 1994, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration plans to spend about US\$5 billion on infrastructure and public works projects, including highway construction, to supplement the US\$11 billion which it is estimated that private companies will spend.

On a related matter, La Jornada reported that US Transportation Secretary Federico Pena, Mexican Communications and Transportation Secretary Emilio Gamboa Patron, and Canadian Transportation Minister Douglas Young will meet in Washington during March to discuss a strategy to enhance the north-south transportation corridors which link the three countries. The three officials are expected to discuss mechanisms for technical cooperation, harmonization of transportation regulations and innovative methods for financing new infrastructure construction. According to a recent US Department of Transportation study, NAFTA is expected to increase land traffic at US-Mexico border crossings by between 120% and 200% between now and the year 2000.

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