



Over 100 miles of Valley highways to be designated interstate

WESLACO, May 30 - Rio Grande Valley residents will soon have a new interstate name to learn and it is not I-69.

U.S. 83 from Harlingen to Mission is going to be designated I-2 in the summer because the 47-mile stretch of road is up to interstate quality. At the same time, U.S. 77 from Brownsville to Raymondville will be designated I-69 East and U.S. 281 from Pharr to Edinburg will be designated I-69 Central.

Confirmation of the names was made by Victor M. Mendez, administrator in the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration on Thursday during a two-day visit to the Valley.

"As of today we have approved the designation of Interstate 2. The Texas Transportation Commission has taken action on this and approved it. So, TxDOT can begin placing the shields on the highways," Mendez told the Guardian.

"I-2 and I-69 will bring future economic opportunities along this corridor. For an economic standpoint the potential is tremendous. It is important for us in terms of connecting our economies throughout the nation and ultimately to the rest of the world."

Mendez made announcements about I-69 and I-2 at two venues on Thursday. He spoke with Cameron and Willacy county leaders at the Harlingen Country Club at a breakfast event and to Hidalgo County leaders at a luncheon event at the Rio Grande Valley Partnership (RGVP) offices in Weslaco. RGVP and Congressman Filemon Vela were the hosts for the two events.

Mario Jorge, the Pharr District engineer for TxDOT, was present at both events. He told the Guardian that a ceremony or two would take place later this summer to officially unveil the new signage for I-69 E, I-69 C, and I-2. He said the expressways would keep their current names also – U.S. 77, U.S. 281, and U.S. 83.

"Today's news is very exciting. We have been working very hard over the last 15 years to reconstruct our highways to interstate standards," Jorge said.

Asked why U.S. 83 in the Valley would be called I-2, Jorge said usually, interstate's running east to west are designated with even numbers and that the lowest even numbers are placed at the southern end of the nation, such as I-10, which runs from Santa Monica, Calif., to Jacksonville, Fla., and which runs through Houston, San Antonio and El Paso. Also, Jorge said, there is a major east-west highway in northern Mexico called Highway 2 so it made sense to have the same number. Jorge said the summer ceremony to unveil the new interstate signs would be coordinated by RGVP and the Alliance for I-69 Texas. RGVP President and CEO Julian Alvarez said he is hoping to get a number of VIPs to attend the unveilings.

Many dignitaries were at Thursday's two transportation events. They included Harlingen Mayor Chris Boswell and Mission Mayor Beto Salinas at the Harlingen event, and Pharr Mayor Polo Palacios and Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia at the Weslaco event.

Present at both events was Polk County Judge John Thompson, chairman of the Alliance for I-69 Texas. "After 20 years of doing this you wonder if you are going to live long enough to see it. But, concrete is being poured, signs are going up. It is a great day," Thompson said.

When finally complete, I-69 will run from the Rio Grande Valley all the way north to Port Huron, Michigan, next to the Canadian border. Asked where else the I-69 signage had gone up in Texas, Thompson said the first stretch of I-69 was unveiled in Robstown. Since then two small sections have been unveiled in Houston with a third on the way. I-69 signs were also now on display in Texarkana, he said.

"We have about 250 miles that are at I-69 status or close to being signed as I-69. And, we have \$742 million worth of projects ongoing right now to bring other parts of the project up to interstate standard," Thompson said.

"I am so proud of what is going on in the Valley and what is going on up and down the I-69 corridor. But, most of what is going on right now that is newsworthy is in the Valley. Hopefully it will expand up the state. I am so proud of the cooperative nature of the Valley leaders. And I am so proud to be here with longtime friends. We have worked together for so long. It is a great day."

Cameron County Commissioner David Garza agreed with Thompson's sentiments. At the Harlingen event he asked for a moment's silence to remember two of the Valley's biggest champions for I-69, the late Bill Summers and the late Col. Bill Card.

"This is a culmination of years and years of work by many dedicated Valley folks, some of whom are no longer with us, such as Bill Summers and Col. Bill Card. They never got to see this happen. For the rest of us it is a dream come true. The significance of I-69 is immense. We will be able to look back in 20 years and see the growth that occurred because of these interstates. It will be just like what happened in the Dallas area," Garza said.

Alvarez also recognized the contributions of Summers and Card at the Weslaco event.

Congressman Vela told the Guardian that with 1.2 million living in the Valley and even more living just across the border in Tamaulipas, the region deserved an interstate system. "From a metropolitan standpoint we are one of the largest areas in the country. We have to keep driving that point home in Washington, D.C. We are a large metropolitan area," he said. Vela also said it was an exciting time to be representing the Valley with interstate signage on its way, a new university and medical school already announced and, potentially, the SpaceX project being worked on in Brownsville.

Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia agreed. "So far, 2013 has been good to the Valley. Both our state legislative delegation and federal legislative delegation have been working to develop our area properly, which is important. This is a big step," Garcia said.

Edinburg City Manager Ramiro Garza said that while it is exciting to see interstate designation happening in the Valley area leaders in South Texas could not rest until U.S. 77 and U.S. 281 are upgraded to interstate standard between the Valley and Interstate 37. "We still have a lot of work to do, as Mr. Mendez mentioned. This is a great time for the region, because of the designation, finally, but now we need to connect it to I-37. This is a great step but we need to find ways to find a connection to 37," Garza said.

Administrator Mendez gave the Guardian an exclusive interview while at the Harlingen Country Club. He spoke about the need to speed up federal transportation projects and the reauthorization of MAP-21.

Mendez said MAP-21, which Congress passed last July, has been transformational for freight, performance management, project delivery and environmental streamlining. He said that as part of MAP-21, the Administration was collating information for a national freight network by asking states what their priorities are. "We want to connect land and sea ports. We want to connect to the world<" Mendez said.

Mendez added that a new transportation bill will be needed by Oct. 1, 2014. He said within the new bill, policies will be tweaked based on what has been learned from MAP-21. "The biggest issue outstanding is still the levels of funding we as a nation are prepared to implement to bring our transportation system up to par," Mendez acknowledged.

Mendez also mentioned his department's Every Day Counts initiative, which aims to expedite project delivery at a much faster rate. "We are engaging the private sector, asking them to give us their best ideas to accelerate projects, to cut project delivery time in half. Mendez said the initiative is working and cited examples in states like Utah and

Massachusetts where bridges are being slid into place on busy interstates over a weekend. “We are looking for innovative financing strategies to bring the private sector into the mix.

Mendez said if anyone in the Valley has any innovative ideas for transportation projects they should email him at victor.mendez@dot.gov. “I am very accessible, I am ready to look at the ideas,” Mendez told the Guardian.