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Hidalgo County News Release

Judge J.D. Salinas pushes for improvements on U.S. Highway 281

ALICE — County Judge J.D. Salinas III and leaders of cities along U.S. Highway 281 met this week to discuss plans to convert the main northbound route from Hidalgo County into an interstate-like non-stop thoroughfare.

The purpose of the “U.S. 281 Coalition” meeting, called by Judge Salinas, was to garner support for the highway’s inclusion in plans for Interstate 69, a trans-national trade route envisioned to be the shortest and fastest link between the economic centers of the United States, Mexico and Canada. Because the majority of cross-border trade moves by truck, I-69 is needed to increase mobility, safety, air quality and fuel economic development opportunities.

There have been discussions about whether to designate U.S. 281 or U.S. 77 as the route for I-69. Factors such as environmental impact studies, cost-benefit analysis and economic considerations will be key determinants. A commission will ultimately make the final decision — both highways could be included in the final plan — but regardless, U.S. 281 needs to be prepared.

“The bottlenecks have got to go,” said Judge Salinas.

Several TxDOT-proposed improvements along U.S. 281 would make it more attractive for the I-69 project. The proposed improvements are: 1) Direct connectors from U.S. 59 Eastbound to IH-37 Northbound and from U.S. 59 Westbound to U.S. 281 Southbound in George West; 2) An overpass in the school zone in Ben Bolt; and 3) A possible tolled relief truck route around Premont or tolled freeway through Premont. Construction is expected to start as early as the end of this year on seven miles of freeway with three overpasses in Falfurrias.

“First and foremost, making these improvements along U.S. 281 is vital to relieving congestion, increasing safety, facilitating trade and improving our evacuation routes,” said Judge Salinas.

“In addition, wherever TxDOT puts I-69 will determine growth. The question we aim to answer is how do we position ourselves to benefit from the economic activity that will be generated from increased trade along this route? What the coalition does collectively impacts the economic future of the entire region.”

Discussions about U.S. 281/I-69 are by no means over. Judge Salinas will meet with the County Judges of Jim Wells, Live Oak and Brooks counties just before a quarterly meeting of the I-69 Alliance from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. on Friday, May 4, 2007, in Corpus Christi.

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