

U.S. 36 celebration: Voters, local leaders made four-lane road possible

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U.S. Sen. Kit Bond gestured toward a stretch of four-lane U.S. 36 near Macon on Saturday and credited local voters and local leadership with the vision and support to build the nearly complete highway.

"Infrastructure is literally the foundation of our day to day living," Bond said.

Bond's invitation to the U.S. 36 dedication was not some symbolic gesture. During the past decade, Bond helped win federal transportation earmarks worth \$27 million. In the preceding decade Bond was instrumental in obtaining federal funds to build the new Mark Twain Memorial Bridge at Hannibal.

State Sen. Bill Stauffer sent a message by Pony Express re-enactor congratulating the counties of Marion, Monroe, Shelby and Macon for having the foresight to approve Proposition 36 and Proposition 36B -- a half-cent sales tax approved in 2005 -- that made the highway dedication possible.

Stauffer, long-time chairman of the Missouri Senate Transportation Committee, said the approval of a half-cent sales tax to pay a local share of the work on U.S. 36 "allowed the area to control its own destiny."

Macon Mayor Dale Bagley agreed that without local voters support for the sales tax U.S. 36 could not have been completed as a divided highway in his lifetime.

Rudy Farber, chairman of the Missouri Highways and Transportation Commission, said if a similar cost-share project was brought to the state this year, there would be no money.

"We'd have to say we just can't do it," Farber said.

As the highway dedication ceremony proceeded along U.S. 36 from Macon to Hannibal, the promise of jobs and growth was more than just speculation.

Charlie Sharp of Heartland Christian Academy said Heartland Creamery and other operations currently employ about 470 people.

"We'd like to double that with some of the things we're looking at" and the four-lane highway access will help, Sharp told those gathered at South Shelby High School.

Gary Leu of Shelbina was applauded at the high school where his persistence led to the Cardinal Connector where an at-grade crossing was originally planned. Leu, a truck driver, lobbied tirelessly for an entrance into South Shelby that would save the lives of young drivers or passengers on school buses.

State Sen. Wes Shoemyer, D-Clarence, said Leu proved that one person can make a difference.

Donald Sanford, mayor of Clarence, called the highway "a life-changing accomplishment" that came about because people invested in themselves and their community.

Thomas A. Oakley of the Tri-State Development Summit said completion of U.S. 36 as a divided highway also completes the long-sought Chicago-to-Kansas City Expressway. A C-KC logo was unveiled at Hannibal and

Oakley said the logos and the Route 110 designation will help motorists travel the corridor.

"People around here have always wanted to finish U.S. 36, but it's like you got a bonus with the C-KC -- completing two major national highway corridors," he said.

As Oakley spoke, a sign near the corner of the stage at Hannibal's Veterans Road overpass showed that it is 303 miles to Chicago and 210 miles to Kansas City.

Artwork used on the dedication materials included four different distinctions of the highway. It bears the C-KC logo, the highway's title as the VFW Memorial Highway and the signs denoting the U.S. 36/Interstate 72 corridor.

Another part of the dedication seal shows a light bulb with the words, "Missouri Highway 36 -- The Way of American Genius." It refers to some of the remarkable people who lived along the U.S. 36 corridor including Mark Twain in Hannibal, Gen. John J. Pershing in Laclede, J.C. Penney in Hamilton, Walt Disney in Marceline and Theodore Gary, a Macon man who invented rotary dialing for phones.

Members of the Missouri VFW Riders led the caravan throughout the day Saturday, celebrating a safer highway and it's designation as the VFW Memorial Highway.

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