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Carrying Dreams Across Missouri Highway 36 Raises Stature With Final Four-Lane Stretch

An exceptionally wet spring delayed the completion of a decades-long highway project spanning the state, but a celebration on the east side of Missouri went on as planned Saturday.

As local residents know it, U.S. Highway 36 has had four lanes for many years. But the east side of the state is just now seeing the completion of the project that connects Hannibal with St. Joseph — four lanes across the state. The promise of increased economic development with the added lanes has proven true, most recently in the Cameron and Chillicothe communities.

Shelby Hindee was part of the ribbon-cutting celebration a quarter-century ago for the completed stretch between St. Joseph and Cameron. Piece by piece, the highway was expanded from two lanes to four with state and federal funds. But as money for the project dried up, the final 52-mile stretch from Macon into Hannibal needed help. Residents in the four counties affected approved a half-cent sales tax in 2006 to make up for lost funds.

“Without the foresight of the people in those four counties and their willingness to step up to the plate and pay for it,” said Mr. Hindee, the economic developer for the city of Cameron, “it wouldn’t have happened. None of the rest of us on this side of the state had to do that.”

The cost has increased in the years since the Missouri Department of Transportation’s northwest district completed its expansion. From 1997 to 2002, about \$25.6 million was spent to construct eastbound and some westbound lanes between Cameron and the western border of Livingston County, a 27-mile stretch. The cost now is estimated at approximately \$2 million per mile.

“The four lanes have been a godsend to use, truthfully,” said Terry Rumery, an economic developer in the Chillicothe area.

Mr. Rumery said the No. 1 perk is safety. But another advantage, and one that was predicted from the onset of the four-lane plan, is economic development.

“It’s one of the major factors in locating industry,” Mr. Rumery said of

transportation issues. "Having four lanes makes you competitive."

Chillicothe sports a new hotel, shopping center and Lowe's Home Improvement Store.

"I guarantee you, that store would not be here on a two-lane road," he said.

Cameron, which carries the moniker "Crossroads of the Nation" because of its position at Interstate 35 running north and south and Highway 36 running east and west, benefitted most recently with the addition of a Case New Holland parts depot, which serves 560 dealers in 11 states. Mr. Hindee said the Highway 36 expansion was an important factor in landing the company.

"If you don't have what they want," he said of attracting new businesses, "you're not on their radar and they go elsewhere."

The project means the road is now part of the fastest route from Kansas City to Chicago, said Mr. Rumery, who is a past president of the Highway 36/Interstate 72 Association. The route allows drivers to bypass the congestion surrounding St. Louis, which was part of the former fastest route.

"It's a great thing for the state of Missouri and its citizens," Mr. Rumery said. "It's been money well spent."

Convention and visitors bureaus from across the state are now using the highway as a marketing tool for their communities. A group called the Highway 36 Heritage Alliance is working with MoDOT to promote the sites along the way through an interpretive CD that became available Saturday. The CD guides motorists from St. Joseph to Hannibal, and vice versa.

J.C. Penney, Gen. John Pershing, Walt Disney and Mark Twain had boyhood homes in communities along the route.

Marci Bennett, executive director of the St. Joseph Convention & Visitors Bureau, said the alliance, which is a grassroots effort, is marketing these individuals as part of the "The Way of American Genius." For more information about these efforts, visit americangeniushighway.com.

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