



# The Interstate is 50



## 2006 – The Year of the Interstate

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the federal legislation that created the Interstate Highway System. This network of nearly 47,000 miles of divided highways has been called the greatest public works project in history. It not only linked our nation, and boosted productivity to sustain a more than tenfold increase in the gross national product since the network's inception, but also serves as the backbone of the world's strongest economy. In 1994, the American Society of Civil Engineers designated the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways as one of the "Seven Wonders of the United States."

### Background:

One of the precursory steps in establishing the Interstate system was the first "Federal-Aid Highway Act," which was signed into law in 1916 by President Woodrow Wilson. This legislation directed the federal government to bear 50% of the cost associated with road building. In order to be eligible for federal funds, states needed a professional highway department and had to maintain the federal-aid road once it was completed. Three years later, Oregon became the first state to level a fuel tax on gasoline, a course soon followed by many states. During the 1920's and 1930's, \$2 billion for federal-aid road construction was authorized.

Another major milestone was a 1939 report to Congress titled, "Toll Roads and Free Roads." It documented the need for a 26,700 mile network of non-toll expressways for which the Federal government would bear more of the cost than the traditional 50%.

Plans for this national system of expressways were presented to Congress in 1944 by the National Highway Committee, appointed by President Franklin Roosevelt, and headed by Commissioner of Public Roads Thomas H. MacDonald. By this time, the plan called for a system of 33,900 miles of expressways and 5,000 miles of auxiliary routes. Congress ended up designating a total of 40,000 miles for the National System of Interstate Highways in 1944, but funding would not be authorized until 1952, when President Harry Truman signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1952. This legislation authorized a down payment of \$25 million for the Interstate system.

The final green light for the U.S. interstate highway system was not given until President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 into law. Title I of the act increased the system's proposed length to 41,000 miles; required nationwide design standards (developed through AASHTO); established a new method for apportioning funds among states; and set the federal government's share of the project cost at 90 percent. Title II—the Highway Revenue Act of 1956—created the Highway Trust Fund as a dedicated source of funding for the Interstate Highway System, on a pay-as-you-go basis through the federal gas tax and other motor-vehicle user fees. Subsequent acts by Congress have extended the Interstate system mileage to its current length.

# Interstate Quick Facts

- **Established By:** Federal Highway Act of 1956 (signed June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1956)
- **Official Name:** Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways (designated so in 1990)
- **Total Mileage:** 46,773 (as of 2003)
- **Original Projected Cost of the Interstate System:** \$38 billion in 1958, adjusted to \$129 billion in 1991.
- **First Interstate Segments:** Several states lay claim to this (all are **concrete**):
  - **New York:** A portion of Grand Central Parkway opened in 1936 was later incorporated into the Interstate system as I-278.
  - **Pennsylvania:** A portion of the Pennsylvania Turnpike opened in 1940 and is now part of I-70 and I-76.
  - **Missouri:** The first contract to be awarded with the new interstate funding (August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1956) was for a portion of US Route 66 in Laclede County, now a part of I-44.
  - **Kansas:** The first project to be completed (November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1956) under the new Federal Highway Act of 1956 was a portion of US Route 40, now a part of I-70.
- **Number of Bridges:** 55,512 (most of which are **concrete**)
- **Number of States Initially Constructing Concrete Interstates Only (99% or more):** Five (DE, NE, WI, WV, MO)
- **Number of States Originally with More Than 90% of their Interstate Paved in Concrete:** Thirteen (DE, NE, WI, WV, MO, IL, AR, ND, SD, OH, PA, IN, IA)
- **State Currently with the Highest Percentage of Concrete Interstate:** Iowa, at 91%.
- **State Currently with the Most Miles of Concrete Interstate:** California, with 1,186mi
- **Percentage of Interstate Mileage Currently Consisting Solely of Concrete Pavement:** 29%
- **Percentage of Interstate Mileage Currently Consisting of Either Concrete or Composite Pavement:** 55%
- **Amount of Concrete Used in the Construction of the Interstate:** Nearly 300 million cubic yards.
- **More Than One-Half of States Paved More Than One-Half of Their Interstates in Concrete.**
- **A Significant Majority of Our Interstates Was Originally Constructed With Concrete, Including the First Segments Constructed.**

**Sources:** *America's Highways, USDOT, 1976; The Roads That Built America, McNichol, 2003; The Numbers Game; How it Works with the Interstate System, FHWA News, 1981; Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways Engineering Marvels, Weingroff, 1996; Highway Statistics (1992 and 2004), FHWA's Office of Highway Policy Information; Transportation.org; Artba.org*