

EDITORIAL: Highway improvements

8/30/2006 6:58:06 AM
Daily Journal

The opening Tuesday of the final four-lane link - near Kilmichael - on U.S. Highway 82 from Columbus to Greenville, completes another important route in what eventually should be a superior statewide arterial road system.

It all began, of course, with passage of the 1987 Highway Program, the first mandated and adequately funded plan to build roads where they are most needed. Two critical highways through Northeast Mississippi - U.S. 45 and U.S. 78 - were built because of the 1987 program; U.S. 82 also is part of that bellwether initiative.

The four-laning of Miss. 25 - another 1987 program route - from Starkville to Jackson was completed earlier this year, and that provides an unbroken four-lane link to and from Northeast Mississippi with the rest of the state.

The 1987 program, enacted by the Legislature over the veto of Gov. Bill Allain, was to cost \$1.6 billion and is funded with highway user taxes. The goal was 1,077 miles of four-lane highways over a 14-year period. In 1998, the Mississippi Department of Transportation was given authority to borrow \$200 million through revenue bonds, as required, to complete the system. Tax sources designated to pay for the program included a motor fuel tax, a \$5 car tag fee, a highway contractor's tax, federal aid, and proceeds from the revenue bonds.

In the 2002, the Legislature passed a Phase IV of the 1987 plan and called it Vision 21, another needs-based highway program. Vision 21 is a \$3.6 billion plan to upgrade existing highways, or build new highways where they are needed. The law sets funding at \$200 million per year, beginning this year.

The goal when the 1987 program was initiated was to build arterial highways within 30 miles or 30 minutes of every Mississippian, effectively criss-crossing the state.

All of the planned original mileage in the 1987 program is under contract or completed.

Other important projects are in beginning phases:

n Miss. Highway 15 near and through Walnut in northern Tippah County is supposed to be four-laned to the Tennessee line, either as a "widened" four-lane or as a bypass around the town. Widening projects also are moving ahead on Miss. 15 in the southern part of the state, and public meetings were held this week in Jones and Jasper counties about that work. Highway 15 runs the length of the state from the Tennessee line to just north of Biloxi on the Gulf of Mexico.

n Major improvements are in early phases for Miss. Highway 7 at Oxford and its interchanges with Miss. 6 and Miss. 9, south of Oxford.

n Miss. Highway 6/76, an Appalachian Highway System corridor funded mostly by federal money, is open from Oxford to Pontotoc and under construction from Pontotoc to Tupelo. A bypass around Pontotoc's north side opened this summer. The new Miss. 6 will connect with U.S. Highway 45 near the intersection of South Green Street and South Gloster Street in Tupelo.

One of the Daily Journal's main editorial policy goals - for more than 50 years - has been a highway system adequate for safety and economic development. The priority continues because the work isn't complete.