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Interstates face tougher debate ahead

July 2, 2006

During the buildup to the 1982 World's Fair, promoters rightly touted the three interstate highways in the Knoxville area as an asset for the region's economy and for those driving here for the six-month-long event.

With Interstates 40 and 75 passing through Knoxville and I-81 winding south from Virginia and points north before ending less than 40 miles east of the city, the area appeared blessed with good transportation routes. That, of course, was millions of vehicles ago.

Now, almost 25 years later, the three interstates remain an asset for the economy and for travelers, especially with a dearth of interstate public transportation. But there are downsides - the increasing amount of air pollution, the ongoing threat to the infrastructure from the sheer volume of traffic and the blight to the landscape in one of the most scenic areas of the nation.

As Knoxvillians and all Americans observe the 50th anniversary of the interstate highway system, there is much to applaud - as those who used to drive along two-lane highways before the system was completed would attest. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose interest in a safe, efficient highway system grew from personal experience following World War I and during his service in Germany in World War II, signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act that led to creation of the interstate system.

What was largely for military defense purposes in the Cold War has proved a boon for millions of civilians during the last five decades. Interstates gave Americans access to places that otherwise would have been too difficult to reach by automobile and perhaps too cumbersome to reach by other means.

Interstates made the family car a necessity and no longer a luxury, as people moved from the central areas of cities to suburbs and beyond, some commuting to their jobs from two or more counties away.

But there is also much with which to be concerned. If interstates drew cities closer to each other, they also split parts of urban areas, weakening an earlier sense of community. Witness, for example, complaints about I-40 over the years from residents in East Knoxville and in the Fourth and Gill neighborhood.

It is probably fitting, therefore, that during the 50th anniversary of the system, debate has emerged over a new proposed interstate: I-3.

Named to honor the U.S. Army's Third Infantry Division based in Fort Stewart, Ga., for its role in the war on terror in Iraq, I-3 would run from near Knoxville to Savannah, Ga. The federal highway has been supported in Congress by Georgia representatives who claim the South had been neglected in the number of interstate highways built in the 1950s through 1970s, the need to link installations vital to the nation's defense, including Oak Ridge and the Savannah River Plant, with the port of Savannah and strengthening the economy in parts of North Georgia, Western North Carolina and East Tennessee.

The road has drawn large-scale opposition. The local Harvey Broome Group of the Sierra Club has made stopping the project a priority. There is a Web site opposing the project as well as others defining it.

What is clear with the debate over I-3 is that the building of interstates is no longer a given. Pollution and damage to the environment are central concerns here as well as staggering costs: The \$400,000 approved two years ago for a feasibility study for I-3 already has tripled to \$1.32 million.

As the nation observes the interstate system's 50th birthday, the lines of argument for future projects have been defined. They likely will be more difficult to build, with a burden of proof for their need being on those who propose them.



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