

INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM DESIGNATIONS

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Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT): Public website offering information and resources for drivers, businesses, government officials, and anyone interested in learning about TxDOT.



TxDOT 2025-2026 Educational Series: Focuses on key transportation issues affecting TxDOT and Texas.



OVERVIEW

The United States Congress first created the Interstate Highway System, now formally known as the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, in 1958. While Congress has extended the length and definitions of the Interstate Highway System various times since then, interstate highways have remained critical roadway infrastructure that connect the nation's principal metropolitan areas, cities, and industrial centers, serve the national defense, and provide important corridors connecting the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The Interstate Highway System in Texas helps to facilitate the safe movement of people and goods and connects Texans and the traveling public. According to the 2023 Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) Texas Roadway Inventory, there are more than 8,550 centerline interstate miles, including frontage roads, in Texas. Federal law prescribes a multi-step process for interstate highway designation involving many transportation partners, including Congress, the United States Department of Transportation, and state departments of transportation.

INTERSTATE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Before pursuing an interstate highway designation, community leaders should consider the challenges and benefits that the facility may bring to the communities along the corridor. An interstate highway corridor can attract new businesses, improve safety along the corridor, enhance freight mobility, reduce travel times, and connect rural and urban Texas. Conversely, communities along a newly constructed interstate highway may experience new challenges with the facility, including loss of access, changes to access, the potential for the state to use eminent domain to acquire both residential and business properties along the corridor, and travelers bypassing downtown areas. An interstate highway also can change the footprint of a community and challenge existing businesses and local governments to adapt to different traffic patterns.



INTERSTATE REQUIREMENTS

REQUIREMENTS PRIOR TO CONSTRUCTION

Before TxDOT can begin constructing any roadway, including an interstate highway, federal and state laws require that TxDOT and its planning partners take several steps in the project development process. TxDOT must ensure the completion of required components that may include:

- Traffic and safety analyses;
- Public involvement;
- Preliminary engineering, environmental clearance, permitting, and mitigation;
- Inclusion of the project in multiple financially constrained plans, including TxDOT's Unified Transportation Program (UTP), the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), and the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP);
- Final design;
- Interstate access justification with the Federal Highway Administration;
- Railroad agreements; and
- Right-of-way acquisition and utility adjustments.

INTERSTATE DESIGN STANDARDS

Interstate highways are subject to a uniform set of standards throughout the country. These design standards set the Interstate Highway System above all other components of the National Highway System and ensure consistent design, development, construction, and preservation. State departments of transportation, working through the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), develop and maintain the Interstate Highway System design standards, and the Federal Highway Administration finalizes and circulates them for application nationwide. A few prominent interstate design standards include:

- Full control of access;
- Minimum design speeds;
- Minimum of two travel lanes in each direction;
- 12-foot lane widths;
- 10-foot right paved shoulders;
- 4-foot left paved shoulders (when 2 lanes in one direction) and 10-foot (when 3 or more lanes in one direction);
- Minimum interchange spacing; and
- Ramp spacing and lengths to accommodate weave distance and exit deceleration and access acceleration.

For the designation of an existing highway section that does not currently meet interstate standards, the state department of transportation will need to re-design and re-construct the highway section to meet those standards before beginning the designation process. Constructing a highway section to meet interstate design standards typically takes years to complete.





FUNDING AND PROJECT SELECTION

Currently, there is no specific federal funding program set aside to build future interstate highway projects. As a result, these projects must compete with all other Texas highway improvement projects for funding in the state's annual project selection process carried out through TxDOT's Unified Transportation Program, also known as the "UTP."

TxDOT and the Texas Transportation Commission must continually balance competing interests throughout the state—new construction, and maintenance and preservation of current assets—while making the best use of the funding that TxDOT receives from federal, state, and local sources. TxDOT uses its annual project scoring system to evaluate and prioritize a combination of projects to construct interstate highways and complete other construction and maintenance projects prior to developing the Unified Transportation Program each year. Congressional designation for a future interstate does not prioritize the future interstate above other state projects. Each project must compete for funding during the annual project selection process in the Unified Transportation Program cycle.

TIMELINE

Constructing a completely new interstate highway or upgrading existing roadways to interstate highway standards can take multiple years or even decades. It requires coordinating with partners, identifying funding, and completing environmental clearance, public involvement, and design before ultimately beginning construction. Once construction is complete, the interstate designation process can begin, which may take several months or well over a year to complete.

DESIGNATION METHODS

Federal law and regulations have established two methods, or what are referred to as "pathways", for designating new highway sections as part of the Interstate Highway System. The first is the Congressional path, and the second is the administrative path. The following sections briefly describe the qualifications and criteria that are required for each Interstate Highway System designation path.

FEDERAL GUIDANCE ON INTERSTATE DESIGNATION METHODS

Congressional Path

Congress has the responsibility to designate High Priority Corridors on the National Highway System. Some of the High Priority Corridors have also been congressionally designated as future parts of the Interstate Highway System by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) and subsequent amendments. Once sections of these High Priority Corridors meet interstate standards, and once they connect to other interstates, then by law, they may become interstates.

In Texas, project development is underway for three new interstate highway systems. The I-69 system that is currently under development and being designated is identified as part of the future Interstate Highway System in ISTEA, as amended. Most recently, the High Priority Corridor 84 (Central Texas Corridor) and High Priority Corridor 38 (the Ports-Plains Corridor in Texas), have been identified as future interstates with the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) on November 15, 2021, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, on March 15, 2022, respectively. Corridor 84 has been designated as I-14 and Corridor 38 as I-27, in accordance with the I-27 Numbering Act of 2023 (S.992).

Administrative Path

Those High Priority Corridors and other National Highway System routes that have not been identified as future parts of the Interstate Highway System by ISTEA, as amended, may be designated as part of or a future part of the Interstate Highway System through this path. However, the qualifications and criteria that must be met are more demanding and restrictive than the Congressional path. Proposals for Interstate or future Interstate designation are to meet the requirements specified in 23 USC 103(c)(4)(A) or 23 USC 103(c)(4)(B), respectively.



INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM DESIGNATION PROCESS

This section provides a high-level overview of the Interstate designation process. This process can take several months to over a year to complete and can be applied to designate new highway sections as part of the Interstate Highway System under either the Congressional path or administrative path. The process includes the following steps:

1. Confirm Section is Ready for Designation

TxDOT will evaluate the highway section to confirm the following: (1) it meets interstate design standards; (2) connects to an existing interstate highway; and (3) meets the other required qualifications and criteria of either the Congressional path or administrative path, as applicable. For newly constructed projects, a Final Acceptance letter approving the project is required to be issued to the contractor from the responsible TxDOT District for the designation process to continue.

2. Prepare Request

Once TxDOT confirms that the highway section is ready for designation, TxDOT will prepare a request for interstate designation. This involves the development of a technical report in accordance with Title 23, Part 470 of the Code of Federal Regulations. Depending on the location of the highway section, the request may include resolutions of support from metropolitan planning organizations and local governments.

3. Submit Request to Federal Highway Administration

TxDOT will submit the technical report and any accompanying documents to the Federal Highway Administration for review and approval. During this step, there is typically some coordination between TxDOT and the Federal Highway Administration to address any of the Federal Highway Administration's comments and concerns. The Federal Highway Administration then will either reject or approve the designation request.

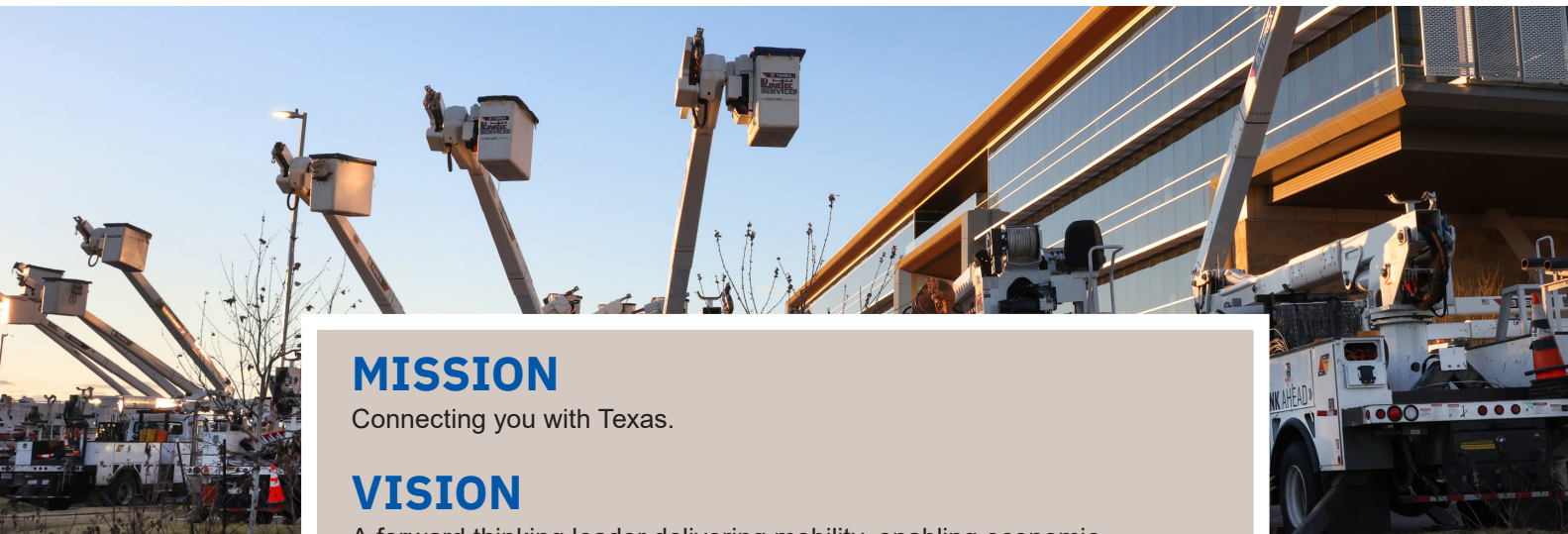
4. Submit Route Number Request to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials

Once the Federal Highway Administration approves the designation request, TxDOT prepares and submits a Route Number Application to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' Special Committee on United States Route Numbering. This committee typically meets twice a year to consider requests.

ADDING THE DESIGNATED INTERSTATE HIGHWAY TO THE STATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

Once Federal Highway Administration and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, have approved the requests, a minute order will be prepared for the Texas Transportation Commission to consider during a regular Commission meeting to add the new interstate highway section to the state highway system.





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We accept responsibility for our actions and promote open communication and transparency at all times.

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