The Interstate Highway System

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Eisenhower returned home after WWII convinced that the United States needed a system of modern highways like the autobahn – both for military use in times of war, and for civilians in peacetime.

A European model

Within six years after the completion of the first Cologne-Bonn autobahn in 1932, Germany added 3,000 kilometers (1,860 miles) of super highway to its road network. Although Hitler has often been given credit for the autobahn, the real precursors were the Avus experimental highway in Berlin (built between 1913 and 1921) and Italy's 130-kilometer autostrada tollway between Milan and the northern Italian lakes (completed in 1923).

Although Germany's depressed economy and hyperinflation of the 1920s prevented plans for new autobahns from being built during that decade, many miles of roadway were built during the time of the Third Reich. Hitler saw the construction of autobahns primarily as a military advantage. However, highway construction as a job-creation program in the 1930s was also recognized by the German government as beneficial. The result: A 45,430-mile highway system.

The birth of the US Interstate Highway System

In his 1967 book, *Highway to a Freer America*, Eisenhower wrote, “After seeing the autobahns of modern Germany and knowing the asset these highways were to the Germans, I decided, as President, to put an emphasis on this kind of road building. This was one thing I felt deeply about, and I made a personal and absolute decision to see that the nation would benefit by it.”

The Interstate Highway System was launched on June 28, 1956 when President Eisenhower signed legislation authorizing funding and the start of construction. The result: A 45,430-mile highway system, costing over $130 billion to build. It has been aptly referred to as “the greatest public works project in history.” The multiple-lane divided highways that make up the Interstate Highway System have also proven to be a safer, quicker, and more efficient means of moving people and goods than conventional two-lane roads.

How “Interstate” has changed our lives

The creation of the Interstate Highway System has dramatically changed the way we go about our daily lives. The proximity of an “Interstate” impacts where we live, where we work, where we shop, and what we do in our spare time.

The Interstate Highway System is also one of the key reasons why we love our cars so much. With a car, coupled with the construction of the Interstate Highway System, Americans began to enjoy unprecedented freedom of movement. With the construction of the Interstate Highway System, we were able to go where we want to go – and get there faster.

Because of Interstate 93 in New Hampshire, for example, Boston area residents now think nothing of hopping into their cars for a day trip to the White Mountains. Bringing a diverse nation together

While initially inspired by military concerns, the creation of the Interstate Highway System also facilitated...
important and valuable cultural transformations. Interstates have united our nation physically, economically, and culturally. The Interstate Highway System now links 90 percent of all American cities with populations greater than 50,000.

According to the University of North Carolina Professor David Hartgen, what was initially sold to the American people as a defense measure soon became an “economic weapon that created the first far-flung commercial society.” Like it or not, the “Interstate” has profoundly changed the entire look of our nation’s cities and suburbs. Many businesses have shifted from “Main Street” to malls or commercial strips along Interstate highways. The success of many businesses is the direct result of the mobility and accessibility provided by the Interstate Highway System.

Social patterns have also shifted dramatically over the past 50 years, and the construction of the Interstate Highway System is one of the key factors impacting this cultural shift. Initially, the construction of the Interstate Highway System made traffic congestion a thing of the past. However, as our nation’s cities and suburbs grew larger, people began to demand more. This led to the construction of more and more highways throughout the country. Thirty-seven percent of America’s major urban Interstate highways are now rated as “severely congested.” New Hampshire’s I-93 is one of them.

Vehicle travel on our national Interstate highways has increased by 157 percent since 1970. The nation’s total population has grown by 38 percent during the same time period. New road construction has increased by only 6 percent over the same time period. You can do the math.

The great American economic engine that the Interstate Highway System helped to create in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s is now more or less “biting its tail.” Current congestion throughout the national Interstate Highway System is wasting resources and stifling economic development.

Funding: Repair and maintenance are essential

The Interstates highways and bridges that we travel every day are showing the effects of their age. Nearly 33 percent of the pavement on Interstate highways across the country is in poor or mediocre condition. Twenty-seven percent of bridges in the national Interstate Highway System are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. The Federal Highway Trust Fund was established by the Federal Aid Highway Act and the Highway Revenue Act in 1956 to provide necessary revenue to build and improve the Interstate Highway System.

Where does the money come from? From 1998-2002, motorists generated approximately $142.5 billion (the gasoline tax) in revenue for the Federal Highway Trust Fund. What does it cost to repair and maintain America’s Interstate Highway System? The current cost of making essential repairs and improvements to the Interstate Highway System is currently about $59 billion annually. This estimated amount is just to repair and maintain the roadways and bridges that make up the Interstate Highway System today.

Can you leave your car at home?

New federal laws are now placing greater emphasis on developing a so-called intermodal transportation system that will link the nation’s highways, waterways, rail, and air systems to ensure continued economic growth. Are you prepared to shed your dependence on the automobile? Perhaps someday we’ll all be flying around like the Jetsons. But for the foreseeable future, the Interstate Highway System will continue to provide the backbone of our transportation needs.

A summary of the Interstate Highway System in New Hampshire

- Two sections of Interstate highways are opened in 1963 from Salem to Manchester and Bow to Tilton.
- In 1965 a section of Interstate 93 from US 3 in Tilton to NH Routes 25 and 3A in Plymouth are opened, providing tourists easier access to the Lakes Region and the White Mountains.
- Fourteen miles of multilane highway were opened in Nashua and on Interstate 89 in the Warner-New London area in November 1967. A total of 30 miles of modern highway was completed in 1967 for a total of $19 million.

The last section of I-89 is finished in 1968 connecting I-93 in Bow to I-91 in White River Junction, Vermont.

Construction begins in 1984 on the final section of I-93 from Littleton to the Vermont state line.

In 1988, the last remaining section of I-93 through Franconia Notch is formally dedicated.

New Hampshire’s Interstate Highway System was completed in December 1988 with the construction of a portion of I-393 in Concord and Penbrooke.

There are 224 miles of Interstate highways joining urban and rural areas in the state and linking the state to Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont.

To learn more about the Interstate Highway System in the United States and to contact national leadership, see the US Department of Transportation website at www.fhwa.gov/hep10/nhs.

For more information about the Interstate Highway System in New Hampshire, see the NHDOH website at www.nh.gov/dot. To call, write, or e-mail your elected officials, refer to the January/February issue of New Hampshire Highways, or call the Good Roads office at 603-224-1823.