

## **Interstate turns 50**

*It changed how we live*

*“Archaeologists of some future age will study (the freeway) . . . to understand who we were.”*

--David Brodsky, *L.A. Freeway: An Appreciative Essay* 1981

**By Deb Miller**

### **Secretary of the Kansas Department of Transportation**

This month we are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great American Interstate system. It has been called the eighth wonder of the world, a linear economy-on-wheels, the 51<sup>st</sup> state and the most ambitious public works project since the Roman Empire.

Those are grandiose descriptions, but considering how the Interstate system has transformed our lives, they may not be overstatements. One would be hard pressed to think of another development in the United States in the past 50 years that has had a greater impact on American society or our economy. As author and Interstate expert Dan McNichol puts it, “There is nothing like it in the world.”

I think most people outside the transportation industry take the Interstate for granted. Most consider it (or, more appropriately, give it no consideration at all) in the same way we consider a sewer or water system. We expect those services to be there and they are. We’ve come to depend on the Interstate and good highways in a way that makes them almost invisible to us.

But it really wasn’t that long ago – within the lifetime of some of us – that a road trip was an adventure. At least one Midwestern family in the 1950s referred to the trip from Kansas City across the high plains to Denver as “The Crossing.” Today, it’s simply a day-long trip.

It was after World War I that America began to seriously consider a national highway system. In 1919, then Lt. Col. Dwight D. Eisenhower was part of the U.S. Army’s motor convoy to gauge the challenges of moving an Army across the United States. The road and bridge system couldn’t handle the heavy military equipment and the trip took 62 days. In the late 1930s, national leaders began to consider the feasibility of building a series of interregional highways across the country.

President Eisenhower, having experienced the 1919 convoy and having seen the efficiency of the German autobahn for moving armies, signed legislation in 1956 authorizing the Interstate system.

As the Interstate was built into the remarkable system we have today, Kansans and fellow Americans had greater choices about where they lived, worked, shopped and spent their leisure time. Travel times were reduced, saving us both time and money. The cost of shipping goods was reduced, saving us money we spend on clothes, food, housing and even transportation. Businesses have adopted more cost-efficient logistics practices. The multiple lanes, separation from other roads, gentler curves and paved shoulders have

made travel safer, and, by one estimate, may have saved approximately 2,600 lives in Kansas since 1956.

On June 21-23, the impact of the Interstate system on our state and country will be in the spotlight at events surrounding the recreation of the 1919 convoy. The organizers of the national convoy, which left San Francisco June 15 and will arrive in Washington, D.C., on June 29, hope that it will lead to more serious discussions about this crucial part of the nation's infrastructure and its future.

Hurricane Katrina showed us that we cannot wait until our infrastructure fails, disrupting our economic life, to appreciate its importance. Although the Interstate in Kansas is in generally good condition, it is aging. Much of it has been reconstructed, but certainly not all of it. We must be mindful of the need to protect the investment we have already made.

That actuality was not lost on author McNichol, who extensively traveled and researched the Interstate for his book, "The Roads That Built America: The Incredible Story of the U.S. Interstate System."

"As long as the Interstate is the highway supporting our society, economy and national security," McNichol wrote, "it will forever need to be the beneficiary of our attention and investment."

I couldn't agree more.

***Governor Kathleen Sebelius appointed Miller Secretary of Transportation in 2002. She has 20 years of experience in the field of transportation, having served in both the public and private sectors.***