HISTORY OF THE WISCONSIN AND NATIONAL INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

1996
History of the Wisconsin/national Interstate Highway System

- **In 1919**, Dwight D. Eisenhower, then a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. army, traveled from Washington to San Francisco as part of the Army's first transcontinental military convoy.

- Eisenhower's trip took two months, mainly due to poor road conditions. After later witnessing Germany's autobahn system, Eisenhower became convinced of the need to improve the nation's roads through "broader ribbons across the land."

- **In 1923**, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff General John Pershing submitted a report to Congress offering possible routes for a nationwide system of express highways. Congress chose not to fund further study or construction.

- **In 1939**, the Bureau of Public Roads submitted a report to Congress advocating construction of "inter-regional" highways connecting major cities that would meet the demands of national defense and increasing traffic. The outbreak of WW II caused delays.

- A January 12, 1944 message from President Franklin Roosevelt to Congress further described the Interstate concept. The document contained a relief traffic map showing certain Interstate routes including the approximate I-90 and I-94 corridors in Wisconsin.

- The Federal Highway Act of 1944 called upon states to designate a 40,000-mile national system of interstate highways.

- **In 1945**, Wisconsin's State Highway Engineer submitted tentative route designations including the current I-94 route in southeast Wisconsin, plus:
  - the Highway 18 zone between Madison and Prairie du Chien;
  - Highway 51 from the present Interstate to Hurley;
  - Highway 53 between Eau Claire and Superior;
  - a Milwaukee to Green Bay route;
  - and an east-west loop between Green Bay and Eau Claire linking with I-94.

- The federal response was to delete the Madison to Prairie du Chien segment and substitute a Tomah to La Crosse segment.
In 1953, the newly created Wisconsin Turnpike Commission considered a possible toll road turnpike.

In 1954, specialists from Baltimore and New York submitted engineering and traffic-revenue studies which concluded that a toll road between Hudson and Highway 41 (Highway 29 loop) would be "cost beneficial" for motorists and the state.

In 1955, negotiations between Wisconsin and federal officials continued. In a report to the Governor, the Turnpike Commission determined toll roads were not feasible and "we ought to cooperate with the federal plans for an Interstate System."

In 1956, appeals from President Dwight Eisenhower and Congress resulted in passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act that authorized construction of a 41,000-mile "National System of Interstate and Defense Highways" to be completed within 15 years. Federal funds would cover 90% of construction costs with states providing 10%.

Wisconsin started Interstate construction that same year (1956) between Goerke's Corners (WIS 18) and County SS in Waukesha County.

In December 1956, federal officials denied Wisconsin's request for a route between Genoa City and Beloit, opting for Madison to Janesville instead.

A Milwaukee to Green Bay route was approved, but the state failed to get plans completed in time and the effort failed.

In 1958, the first section of Interstate highway was completed in Wisconsin – a one-mile segment of I-94 near Johnson Creek in Jefferson County.

In March of 1958, the Turnpike Commission advocated a Milwaukee to Marinette route. Federal officials denied the request.

On September 4, 1958, a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrated completion of the 7-mile Goerke's Corners (WIS 18) to County SS interstate segment.

Initially, Wisconsin was to have only two interstate routes, I-90 and I-94. However, the state convinced the federal government to approve I-43 between Milwaukee and Green Bay (extended to Beloit in the 1980's).
• About 75% of Wisconsin’s Interstate system was built in the decade between 1959 and 1969 including the east-west and north-south Milwaukee freeways (I-94) and the Milwaukee bypass (I-894).

• A 63-mile segment of I-94 between Madison and Milwaukee County was completed over an eight-year period between 1958 and 1966.

• I-90/94 between Madison and Portage entered service in 1961.

• In 1965, an anonymous highway engineer said: “An ideal road may appear almost within reach, but is never quite attainable. The Interstate comes close.”

• In 1969, Wisconsin had completed its initial rural Interstate system at a time when only 70% of the country’s system was complete.

• In 1981, except for the I-43 ramp work near Sheboygan and Milwaukee’s Lake Freeway, the total cost for 1,381 separate Interstate projects was $900 million.

• Wisconsin’s fourth interstate highway, I-39, was designated in the 1990’s between Portage and Wausau (later extended southerly along I-90/94 to Beloit).

• The total cost of Wisconsin’s Interstate Highway System (through 1993) was $1.46 billion (federal funds covered $1.3 billion).

• The nation’s Interstate Highway System began as a massive national defense project, but later evolved into a major economic development force that allowed people and commerce to flow efficiently throughout the country.

• Today, Interstate highways cover some 46,500 miles. The system is considered the largest and most significant public works project the country has ever undertaken.

• Wisconsin has some 647 miles of Interstate (1996). While accounting for less than 1% of the state’s 112,000 miles of total roadway, interstates carry over 15% of the state’s vehicle miles each year.

• Major interstate routes are designated by one or two-digit numbers. North/south routes carry odd numbers - the numbers increase from west to east.

• East/west interstate routes carry even numbers – the numbers increase from south to north.
Appendix:

Correspondence of proposed Interstate Highway connections, 1945.
State Highway Commission of Wisconsin
Layout of Proposed National System of Interstate Highways
June 1945
State of Illinois
Dwight H. Green, Governor
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS AND BUILDINGS
Walter A. Rosenfield, Director

DIVISION OF HIGHWAYS
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Springfield

W. W. Polk
Chief Highway Engineer

May 23, 1945

Mr. E. L. Roettiger
State Highway Engineer
State Highway Commission of Wisconsin
State Office Building
Madison 2, Wisconsin

Dear Mr. Roettiger:

This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter of May 17th with reference to proposed interstate highway connections at the state line between Wisconsin and Illinois.

For the interstate route between Chicago and Milwaukee, the location at the state line which follows substantially U. S. Highway No. 41 is satisfactory to this State.

The routing of the interstate highway from Rockford to a connection at the Wisconsin line seems more complicated. Traffic between Rockford and Beloit is heaviest on State Bond Issue Route 2 which is located on the westerly side of the Rock River, although traffic on U. S. Route 81, located on the easterly side of the river, is not materially less. Our studies have also taken into consideration a location north of Rockford one mile west of Illinois Route 2. However, no decision has been reached as to the location in the Rockford area and I am not prepared to say at this time that the State of Illinois could meet your preferred location at the state line on U. S. Route 81.

Very truly yours,

(S) W. W. Polk
Chief Highway Engineer
June 13, 1945

Mr. S. L. Taylor, Acting Division Engineer
Public Roads Administration
1109 Post Office Building
St. Paul, Minnesota

Dear Mr. Taylor:

SUBJECT: National System of Interstate Highways

Three copies of this report are submitted herewith for approval in designating the national system of interstate highways in Wisconsin. Each copy of the report embodies the following:

1. An official state map showing the proposed system marked in red.
2. A map of Wisconsin showing counties only. The proposed system of interstate highways is superimposed in red to show the counties through which the system extends.
3. Maps are provided for each of the following cities of over 5,000 population.
   - Menomonie, in Dunn County
   - Eau Claire, in Eau Claire County
   - Madison and environs, in Dane County
   - Janesville and Beloit, in Rock County
   - Milwaukee and environs, in Milwaukee County
4. Sketches of routes divided by sections, as follows:
   (a) State line at Hudson to intersection of USH 51 and STH 30 at Madison and south to State Line at Beloit. (3 sheets)
   (b) State line at Prairie du Chien to intersection USH 51 and STH 30 at Madison. (1 sheet)
   (c) Intersection of USH 51 and STH 30 at Madison to Milwaukee and south to state line. On this same map is shown Route A, which is the circumferential route for the city of Milwaukee.
5. (a) Ditto forms IS-1 for interstate highways.
    (b) Ditto forms IS-2 for auxiliary circumferential Highway A near Milwaukee
The data submitted in this report are general in character, subject to more accurate analysis when a specific section of highway is under consideration.

Wherever the proposed routes follow existing state trunk highways, the mileage was obtained from the Highway Planning Survey log of Mileage for State Trunk Highways. Traffic for rural highways was obtained by applying factors to the 1936 traffic data to establish an estimate for 1941 traffic.

Wherever the proposed routes did not follow existing state trunk highways, the mileage was estimated by measurement of large scale maps. Traffic on these routes in rural areas was estimated by assuming a percentage of the traffic transferred from parallel routes.

The estimate of mileage through the city of Milwaukee is subject to change, inasmuch as a definite location for the interstate highway has not been selected. The approximate location of the route shown serves the downtown area at Sixth Street, and the circumferential Route A serves traffic arriving from the south and scheduled for the west but which is not destined for the downtown business district. No traffic figures were shown for the city of Milwaukee as there are no annual 24-hour average figures which are comparable to those in the rural areas.

The selection of the National System of Interstate Highways in Wisconsin was made largely to conform to the system proposed and set up in the report on Interregional Highways, House Document No. 379. The location of an interstate route, for instance between Chicago and Minneapolis, would probably better serve interstate traffic if it followed a diagonal route from Madison to Milton, thence along County Trunk Highway "M" in Rock County and U. S. Highway 14 in Walworth County, striking McHenry in Illinois. No consideration was given to this proposed layout, as we acknowledge the desire of the Public Roads Administration in setting up this National System of Interstate Highways to serve such cities as Rockford, Beloit, and Janesville.

As pointed out in a previous paragraph, a specific location has not been adopted for the city of Milwaukee. The tentative layout serves the downtown area of the city of Milwaukee and the circumferential route was chosen to conform to the suggestion on page 52, House Document No. 379, which specifies that a circumferential route should also serve the dual purpose of bypassing through traffic as well as distributing and assembling other traffic to and from the several quarters of the city.
Following the suggestion of General Administrative Memorandum No. 268, the State Highway Commission of Wisconsin has made an attempt to arrange for interstate connections with adjoining states.

Submitted herewith is a copy of a letter from the Department of Public Works and Buildings in Illinois which states that the location at the state line on U. S. Highway 41 is satisfactory. The route entering Illinois at Beloit is subject to additional study, as no decision has been reached as to the location in the Rockford Area.

In a letter to Mr. F. E. White dated May 17, 1945, the State Highway Commission of Wisconsin proposed a joint agreement with the Iowa State Highway Commission favoring a route between Madison, Wisconsin and Sioux Falls, South Dakota by way of Mason City, Iowa. This route follows U. S. Highway 16 in Wisconsin, crossing the Mississippi River and the Iowa-Wisconsin boundary at Prairie du Chien. To date no reply has been received accepting this proposal.

In a letter dated March 28, 1945, Mr. Kipp of Minnesota states, "We assume that we are in agreement as to the route between the Twin Cities and Madison as this involves the location at Hudson, Wisconsin, on which we are now working with your department."

In this same letter Mr. Kipp suggested the desirability of locating the route between Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Madison, Wisconsin, by way of Route 16 from Tomah, Wisconsin, to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. This route enters Wisconsin at La Crosse and thereby serves a city of considerable size. In a letter dated May 17, 1945, Mr. Kipp was informed that Wisconsin recommends the location of the route of the National System of Interstate Highways between Madison, Wisconsin and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, by way of Mason City, Iowa, substantially along U. S. Highway 16, in preference to the route by way of Tomah along U. S. Highway 16.

Very truly yours

STATE HIGHWAY COMMISSION OF WISCONSIN

E. L. Roettiger
State Highway Engineer

WDR-J
Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to.

E. R. White, Chief Engineer
Iowa State Highway Commission
Ames, Iowa

We recommended US 18, Milwaukee Madison Prairie du Chien as part of National Interstate Highway System.

State Highway Commission of Wisconsin
E. L. Roettiger State Highway Engineer

August 21, 1945

Wire collect.

Iowa State Highway Commission
F. R. White, Chief Engineer.
IOWA STATE HIGHWAY COMMISSION

W. R. WHITE, CHIEF ENGINEER.

A Member of the National Interstate System Wisconsin through Madison to Prairie du Chien as a part of the National Interstate System Advance Wisconsin Union Collected.

DID YOUR COMMISSION RECOMMEND US 16 FROM MILWAUKEE THROUGH MADISON WIS?

E. L. ROTTLINGER, CHIEF ENGINEER, STATE HIGHWAY DEPT.

[Stamp: Received 21 AM 10 31 1927]