

7. CONCLUSION

This Draft EA has been prepared in accordance with the regulations of CEQ (40 CFR 1500-1508), as well as FHWA's implementing regulations (23 CFR 771.119 and 23 CFR 771.135). The proposed alternative is to construct a 4-lane divided highway offset to the west of the existing alignment, including context sensitive designs at spot locations. Based on this assessment, the proposed alternative would satisfy the purpose and need of the project by:

- Providing an **improved north-south highway on a NHS High Priority Corridor that increases the efficiency and safety of commerce and travel** as included in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA).
- **Fulfilling the legislative intent** of the ISTEA; the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21); the **Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU)**, which have provided federally "earmarked" funds for the development of the Heartland Expressway; and the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), which continued authorization of funding as deemed necessary in SAFETEA-LU.
- **Fulfilling legislative intent of the Build Nebraska Act**; the State has identified this project as one of the high priority projects to receive funding under this act.
- To **address roadway and operational deficiencies** along this segment of the Heartland Expressway corridor.

In addition to the above purposes a goal for the project is:

- **Improving the highway infrastructure in order to facilitate economic development** by enhancing the efficiency and mobility of Nebraska Panhandle regional commerce for residents, businesses, visitors, and interstate travel.

The project is considered the next logical segment of the Heartland Expressway because (1) it has the highest traffic volumes, including high truck traffic; and (2) it traverses numerous short dunes requiring frequent climbs and turns resulting in areas that do not meet AASHTO standards for speed limit and NDOR standards for grade. The combination of traffic volumes and frequent climbs and turns results in decreased operational efficiency of this facility.

While the proposed improvements have benefits as a stand-alone project, the approximately 26-mile long route will have greater benefits once the entire Heartland Expressway is completed. According to local officials and business leaders, this connection is a vital link for all sectors of the economy of the Panhandle. A new economic study conducted as part of the Heartland Expressway Corridor study shows that benefits of improvements to US 385 in Nebraska would result in a benefit/cost ratio of 1.7—indicating a positive impact on the regional economy.

After reviewing and studying the Draft EA, FHWA has determined that the document adequately discusses the environmental issues and impacts of the project. A public hearing for the project will be scheduled.