

**Adobe Tower # 8**  
by Jerry Hall and Loretta Hall

*Fortuitous 'Fifty-Six'*

After decades of interest, discussion, debate, and failed attempts at legislation, Congress approved funding and construction of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. For several reasons, the time was right for virtually unanimous passage of the legislation. One crucial element was that President Eisenhower, members of Congress, and the trucking industry continued discussions after proposed legislation failed decisively in 1955. Ultimately, they reached agreement on user tax increases and equitable cost sharing.

Public opinion also played a part. Vehicle registrations had doubled since the end of World War II, surpassing 65 million in 1956. A major force in shaping and expressing public opinion was William Randolph Hearst, Jr, chairman of the nation's largest newspaper company. In late 1952, he assigned one editor the exclusive task of covering the highway problem, and by the end of 1955, Hearst papers around the country had printed the equivalent of 1,229 full newspaper pages on the need for better roads.

A third factor was the growing body of knowledge about planning, designing, and building highways. Since 1944, the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) had conducted and refined origin-and-destination and home-interview studies. In conformance with the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1954, the BPR had also studied the costs of building the proposed Interstate System. Furthermore, in 1955 the American Road Builders Association (ARBA, now ARTBA) completed a Congressionally requested ten-year study to assess the nation's construction industry capability of accomplishing a project of this magnitude.

With the stage appropriately set, Congress passed the legislation and the President signed it on June 29, 1956. Implementation began immediately. One hour after Eisenhower signed the Act, Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks signed a Certificate of Apportionment for the first year's (FY 1958) authorization of \$1.125 billion. A month later, Weeks issued the apportionment for the \$2.55 billion authorization for FY 1959. On July 12, the state highway departments adopted the BPR-approved standards for Interstate-level highway improvements.

One of the BPR's most challenging tasks was to decide the locations of road segments that would be added to the 40,000-mile Interstate System authorized by Congress in 1944. Some new mileage was added by the 1956 Act, and some was available because of refinements to the previously designated system. In a 1957 speech, Federal Highway Administrator Bertram Tallamy said, "If there was ever a problem and a headache that was given to the Bureau of Public Roads, it was to be the Solomon to distribute the newly authorized 1,000 miles plus some 1,102 miles in saving when there were 13,775 miles of requests." BPR initially rejected 8,490 requested miles for not being well integrated with the rest of the System. Then it used a weighted ranking system based on defense importance, system integration, population served, and economic importance to select the best remaining routes.

A second important aspect of the 1956 Act was its time considerations. It ambitiously anticipated completion of the Interstate System in thirteen years. In a departure from the then-normal practice of building roads to meet existing demands, the roads were to be planned for traffic volumes expected twenty years in the future.

Equitably funding the new Highway Trust Fund posed another challenge. For the first time, the Act's Title II, the Highway Revenue Act of 1956, designated certain taxes for highways (both the Interstate System and the federal-aid ABC system). Although it merely formalized an existing tacit relationship between user taxes and highway expenditures, earmarking funds worried some legislators who feared it would set a precedent for other types of programs and diminish Congress's control over federal spending. In one sense, the funding mechanism was set, since the Act identified what proportion of which taxes would go into the Trust Fund—for example, all of the federal taxes on gasoline and diesel fuel (in 1957 they accounted for 89 percent of Trust Fund receipts). On the other hand, a new annual road-use tax on heavy vehicles (exceeding 26,000 pounds) contributed only 2 percent of 1957 Trust Fund receipts but was significant because of its impact on the trucking industry. To ensure equity, the Act directed the Secretary of Commerce to study various classes of road users and evaluate their contributions to the Fund in relation to their proportional share of highway costs.

Despite careful planning and thorough analyses, cost estimates for the Interstate System quickly escalated. Congress initially authorized \$25 billion (90 percent of the expected System cost of \$27 billion). After two years, the estimated cost rose to \$41 billion, making the federal share \$37 billion. This reflected, in part, the transition from theory to reality following the beginnings of construction. In 1968, the estimate climbed to \$56.5 billion. A 1967 study attributed a fourth of that increase to the double-digit inflation rates in prior years. Unanticipated traffic volumes, the addition of more urban interchanges, and enhanced bridge and pavement designs also contributed. Even the Cold War had an impact, as the intercontinental ballistic missiles that had to be transported on US highways were large enough to require greater bridge and tunnel clearances than foreseen in the early 1950s. By the time it was deemed “substantially complete,” the System took thirty-five years to complete, cost \$114 billion in as-spent dollars, and exceeded 46,000 miles in length.

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*This is the eighth in a series of articles tracing the development of the Interstate Highway System.*