



**Texarkana**



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Welcome Center, I-49 leg open today

Mayor says 'great change' will follow opening of highway

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Texarkana, get ready for the express route to Fouke.

About 13 miles of highway designated as Arkansas State Highway 549 will open this morning after a ribbon cutting ceremony is held between 9 and 9:25.

That stretch of highway between Fouke and Texarkana is a section of what will someday be Interstate 49 that connects Shreveport, Texarkana, and Fort Smith with a true interstate highway.

Mayor Horace Shipp of Texarkana, Ark., said he's excited about opening the I-49 section between Texarkana and Fouke.

"The opening of this stretch of interstate highway is the initial phase of a great change that's about to happen in Texarkana, Ark.," said Shipp. "The ability to travel from Fouke to Texarkana on a four-lane high-speed highway and the ability that will come in the future as 549/I-49 is completed ... will bring unlimited opportunities for all sorts of development on the north and the south and around the interior of our city."

Also opening this morning after a 10:15 ribbon cutting is the new Arkansas Welcome Center located at mile marker 7 on eastbound Interstate 30.

Both developments are being hailed by local officials as great additions to the Twin Cities and Texarkana's rich history of transportation.

Texarkana, Texas, Mayor James Bramlett said transportation has always brought growth to Texarkana, calling it the "life blood of the community."

In addition to moving large amounts of traffic more quickly, Arkansas 549 will have another tangible effect, he said.

"I think it's going to make for a safer route through the area than we currently have going down (U.S.) 71," Bramlett said.

Texarkana Chamber of Commerce President Jim Cherry said Fouke could see some development with this road opened.

"I think Fouke will start seeing some growth because there's four-lane access to the city," he said. He also said that U.S. 71 will go back to being the "country road" it was before and return to the capacity it was meant to carry.

Cherry said when the section down to Doddridge is completed sometime next year, it will cut down more on travel time.

The Arkansas Welcome Center will be a nice way to greet drivers as they head east into the Natural State, say

officials.

"The Welcome Center is a wonderful facility. It's modern, it's attractive, it's functional and it will make a very positive first impression to those visitors entering the state of Arkansas," Shipp said. "It will also provide for some of the needs they have as travelers and as visitors to our city and our state."

Shipp is also pleased Texarkana was one of four locations chosen to host new tourist information centers in Arkansas.

Bramlett agreed that the Welcome Center will be an asset.

"Anything we can do to open up the gates of tourism in Texarkana will pay dividends for us in the future," he said.

Gov. Mike Huckabee, Rep. Mike Ross and other state and local officials are scheduled to appear at the ribbon cutting ceremonies.

The Highway 549 ribbon cutting dedication and opening will take place on the southbound on-ramp accessible from westbound Arkansas Loop 245. The Arkansas Welcome Center event will take place in front of the center itself.

Shipp said the challenge for Texarkana is to make the most of the new stretch of highway and make it benefit the community now that federal and state highway departments and contractors have completed Arkansas 549.

"They've done their part on this stretch and now it's up to us," he said.