

SECTION 1: US-23 Corridor Information

HISTORY

Prior to the 1800's, native Americans and early settlers in Michigan navigated their way through the state using the Great Lakes, rivers and Indian trails as the primary transportation routes. An early Indian trail which followed the Lake Huron shoreline from Saginaw Bay to Mackinaw, called The Shore Trail, would eventually become the route for US-23.

Road building in Michigan did not begin until after the American government gained control of the region in the early 1800's. In 1817, the Secretary of War stressed that roads were needed for the purpose of national defense and in order to defend the newly acquired lands. It was also necessary to build roads to connect the region with the rest of the Northwest Territory. However, progress was not quickly made and road building in Michigan lagged for several decades. By 1830, the federal government had started only three roads and only one had been completed. Federal road building ceased in Michigan in 1837 when it acquired statehood. State road improvements continued under township administration and the Plank Road Companies chartered by the State.

Construction of roads in northern Michigan accelerated in 1850's and 1860's when roads were needed to move people and materials as a result of the influx of settlers brought to the area because of the booming lumbering and fishing industries. During this time, short sections of roads, that would eventually become parts of US-23, were being built in the various settlements and lumbering camps that dotted the Lake Huron Shoreline.

In Alpena County, the first meeting of the Highway Commissioners took place March 26th, 1858. At this initial meeting, the first road districts in the county were formed. At their next meeting, later that year, the Highway Commissioners considered the first petition for a highway. The petition was for a road from near the mouth of Thunder Bay River to the Devil River. The request was eventually approved and the following motion was passed; "voted to raise the sum of one hundred dollars, according to the report of the Highway Commissioners, for the purpose of laying out a road from the mouth of Thunder Bay River to the Devil River." During this same period, road construction was also ongoing in Cheboygan County. The first road from Cheboygan to Duncan Bay was finished in 1858. In 1864, the first bridge across the Thunder Bay River was constructed for \$1,000.00. While it was even inexpensive for the times, it was totally inadequate for the forces of the Thunder Bay River and only lasted until 1869. In 1865, the State Legislature passed an act that provided for the establishment of the Duncan, Alpena and Au Sable River State Road that went from Duncan Bay, in Cheboygan County, to the Au Sable River, in Iosco county, via the City of Alpena.

In 1871 the first stage line was established between Standish and Alpena. The following excerpt from *The History of the Lake Huron Shore*, written in 1883, provides a glimpse of what travel was like on what would eventually become US-23: "The road between Standish and Alpena is mostly sand, except between Standish and Pine River, through Au Gres Swamp and across Alcona County. There has not been a trip missed since Mr. Green has been operating the line, although there are times when it would appear a physical impossibility to make the journey."

The early roads were a far cry from the modern highway. After surveyors selected a route, axe men cut away the brush and felled trees along the path low enough so wagons could pass over the stumps. Workmen constructed crude bridges over streams which could not easily be forded. Logs were laid crosswise of the road across bogs and swamps to prevent animals and wagons from miring, this was known as a "corduroy road". Other than this, little was done to provide a surface for the road.



Figure 1: Michigan's Native American Trails

Plank roads were the next big improvement. Road builders fastened 4-inch-thick pine or oak planks to the log rails called "sleepers." When properly maintained, the road surface was relatively smooth. Most plank roads were toll roads, but the money collected was seldom enough to keep them in good condition.

The rapid popularity of bicycles in the 1880's and 1890's was a major impetus for the construction and improvement of roads during this time period. These new road users were the most persistent of those who demanded better roads and organized The League of American Wheelmen to help champion their cause. In Michigan, the group was led by Horatio S. "Good Roads" Earle, who eventually became the State's first highway commissioner. The League of American Wheelmen had a significant and lasting effect on Michigan's road system and would eventually transform into the American Road Builders Association.

The mass production and affordability of automobiles in the early 1900's further increased the need for more and better roads. In 1905 there were 2,700 automobiles in Michigan, two decades later, over two million cars a year were being produced in Detroit. In 1913 the Michigan State Legislature passed the State Trunkline Act. This Act provided increased funding to the townships and counties for road construction and added approximately 3,000 miles to the road system. The new Act created much enthusiasm and led to the first Road Bee Day in Michigan. June 9, 1913, was set aside by The Huron Road Association for a road work bee and it was reported that over 200 miles of road were improved on that day.

In the late 1920's, US-23, as we know it today, began to take shape. The US Highway system came into being in 1926 and the initial route of US-23 was established. Existing trunklines, mostly

supplanting the existing M-10 and M-65, were used for the entire route. This initial US-23 looked quite different than it does today and was much farther inland in several locations. From Standish the route headed northeasterly to Omer, then headed northerly via Twining and Whittemore, then turned east to Tawas. The route continued northerly and easterly to Oscoda, then northerly to Alpena via Lincoln and Spruce. From Alpena, US-23 turned west to Lachine and then turned northerly through Posen into Rogers City. From there US-23 continued on the old M10 route through Onaway and Tower, then curved northward through Aloha to Cheboygan where it traveled northwesterly to Mackinaw City and its northern terminus, following what would eventually become Old Mackinaw Trail.

In the 1930's and early 1940's, US-23 underwent several realignments that rerouted long stretches of the road much more closely to the Lake Huron Shoreline. The section of US-23 that runs from its present day northern junction with F-41 in Alcona County to the Werth Road intersection in Alpena County was realigned in 1933. The road was moved several miles east from its previous alignment along Werth, Spruce, Roe and Gillard Roads. The shoreline rerouting of US-23 in Alcona County continued in 1935-36 with the construction of 15 miles of road that stretched from Harrisville to the Alpena County line. Also in 1935, a 14-mile stretch of road was completed along the Lake Huron Shoreline between Cheboygan and the Presque Isle County line, however, it was not officially designated as US-23 until six years later. In 1939, a 24-mile stretch between Rogers City and the City of Alpena was completed, replacing the previous route that ran concurrently with M-32 through Lachine. The final major relocation of US-23 occurred in 1941 between Rogers City and Cheboygan. The shoreline route saved twelve miles over the old route which traveled through Onaway and is present day M-33.

Although the route of US-23 from Standish to Mackinaw City has remained basically unchanged for the last 60 years, there have been discussions and plans for a possible US-23 freeway from Standish northward to the Oscoda area and a possible US-23 bypass around the City of Alpena. These proposals have been highly controversial and it is unknown if, or when, they will ever be built. The US-23 freeway proposal would have significant environmental impact on wilderness areas along the route. The primary opposition to a US-23 bypass around Alpena has been from neighborhood residents that believe their homes would be negatively impacted by a bypass.

PRESENT CONDITION

The majority of the road surface of the proposed US-23 Sunrise Side Coastal Highway from Mackinaw City to the Alcona County line is in good condition. From Mackinaw City to Alpena the road is typically comprised of two twelve-foot wide paved lanes with three-foot wide paved shoulders. Outside Mackinaw City and through the Cities of Alpena, Rogers City and Cheboygan, portions of the roadway have been widened to three, four and five-foot lanes to accommodate the heavier traffic volumes. The route passes through the downtown districts of Mackinaw City, Cheboygan and Alpena. Rogers City has a US-23 Business Loop that allows motorists to slow down and drive through the City or continue on their way at highway speeds. This portion of US-23 has recently been rebuilt for several miles (from the north end of Rogers City to M-65). A center turn lane has been added along US-23 in the Rogers City area. South of Alpena and through Alcona County, much of the road surface has been recently replaced and is in excellent condition. Through this stretch of road the shoulders are paved surfaces five to eight feet wide which provides safe lanes for bicycles. In Alcona County, north of Harrisville, there are two passing areas. One passing area is four miles long and the other is one mile long. In both areas, the pavement surface widens to four lanes, providing safe passing lanes for northbound and southbound motorist through the hills of northern Alcona County. In the City of Harrisville the highway widens to three lanes to facilitate left hand turning movements in and close to the city.

US-23 breaks off of I-75 just south of the City of Standish. US-23 bisects the City providing residents with easy access to larger cities such as Bay City and Saginaw to the south. Traffic counts taken on US-23 just south of the City in 1999 identified 14,600 vehicle trips over a 24-hour period and 8,900 vehicle trips over a 24-hour period north of the City. The large difference in the traffic volume north and south of the City can be attributed to Standish residents traveling to Saginaw and Bay City. Traveling through the City of Standish and along the commercial stretch on US-23, there are four lanes of traffic with one turn lane (five lanes). Just north of the City the highway narrows to two lanes of traffic each way (four lanes). The four lanes of traffic continue through the City of Omer heading northward where M-65 bisects US-23. At this location one-third of the truck volume is diverted north on M-65. After the M-65 crossing, US-23 becomes a two-lane highway until reaching the community of Au Gres. The road then turns into a four-lane highway, and for a brief stretch includes a turn lane (five lanes) to serve the commercial district through the City. The course again becomes a four-lane highway until just out of the City, where it narrows to two lanes. Just north of the City of Au Gres the roadway again extends to four lanes, providing faster-moving traffic the opportunity to pass. The remainder of the roadway through Arenac County is two lanes.

Entering into Iosco County the road widens to four lanes to provide a passing opportunity for travelers for approximately 1.5 miles. The roadway then tapers down to a two-lane highway until it reaches Tawas City, where there exists a turning lane. Through Tawas City and East Tawas the road widens to four lanes. Heading north out of the Tawas area the road then gains commercial traffic volume from M-55 and returns to a two-lane highway. The road is primarily a two-lane highway until reaching Oscoda except for an additional passing lane near Au Sable Point. Upon entering Oscoda a left turn lane appears and the road becomes a four-lane highway through town. Heading north out of Oscoda the roadway has a left turn lane, and then tapers down to a two-lane highway.

Recently, there have been improvements in the City of Au Gres, specifically the bridge that crosses the Au Gres River. This summer the road was repaved outside of Au Gres for about seven miles. The route's condition is all fairly new; the only rough area to travel exists around the I-75 interchange area.

US-23 SUNRISE SIDE COASTAL HIGHWAY CORRIDOR

This study will describe and delineate the areas found within the corridor of the proposed US-23 Sunrise Side Coastal Highway, from Mackinaw City to Standish. A map showing the general boundaries of the Heritage Route is found on **Map1**.

