

Teacher Notes



You Can Get There From Here: The Interstate Highway System and Its Impact on America

Activity 2 The Interstate – The Pros and Cons

Activity Overview

Students will read about the positive and negative impacts of the Interstate Highway System, and then they will work in small groups to discuss and answer questions regarding these impacts. Once the small group work is completed, the class will discuss their answers and insights into the effects the Interstate Highway System has upon life in America.

Directions

Before the Activity Begins

Pass out a copy of the Student Data Sheet, **The Interstate: Pros and Cons**, to each student. Send the **Activity2** edc resource file to each student's device. Be sure that all students have a keyboard connected to their TI-83 Plus devices.

Divide the class into small workgroups. Each group will read and discuss the exercise, and then answer the questions as a group using the **Activity2** edc resource file to record the answers.

Activity at a Glance

- ◆ **Subject:** Social Studies
- ◆ **Subject Area:** U. S. History
- ◆ **Category:** Postwar America
- ◆ **Topic:** The Rise of Suburbia
- ◆ **Grade Level:** 9 - 11
- ◆ **Prerequisites:** None
- ◆ **Total Teaching Time:** 50 minutes

Materials

- ◆ TI-83 Plus
- ◆ LearningCheck™ App
- ◆ **Activity2** edc resource file
- ◆ Student Data Sheet: **The Interstate: Pros and Cons**
- ◆ TI External Keyboard

During the Activity

Monitor the student groups' discussions and answer any questions that may arise as they answer the questions. When the students are ready to record their answers to the questions, have them use the **Activity2** file on their devices.

After the Activity

Lead a class debriefing discussion using the Student Data Sheet and the resource file. Summarize the key issues and controversies related to the interstate highway system.

Supplemental Resources

Below are some resources that teachers can use to expand their knowledge about the Interstate Highway System. Many of these resources were used in preparation of this and other lessons in this unit.

Books

- ◆ *“Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life,”* by Tom Lewis. This book is perhaps the most comprehensive study of the impact of the highway on all aspects of American life.
- ◆ *“The Story of America’s Roads,”* by Ray Spangenburg and Diane Moser. This book is a simple, complete study of the development of American highways.

In addition to these books, most up-to-date American history texts contain brief overviews of the building of the Interstate.

Film

- ◆ *“Great Drives: Route 66”* from the PBS series by the same name. This film contains valuable information about America’s traditional love of the open road and as well as information about roadside architecture and art. It also describes the negative social and economic impact on communities that are bypassed by Interstate highways.
- ◆ *“Post-War Hopes, Cold War Fears”* from the PBS series “A Walk Through the Twentieth Century with Bill Moyers.” This film does a good job placing the interstate in its historical context, and it describes the car culture and the growth of suburbs as well.

Film clips from the movies mentioned in the abstract, as well as music recordings, can be used to supplement this lesson.

Internet Resources

- ◆ *“The Public Purpose: Highway & Motorway Fact Book”* at www.publicpurpose.com. This site contains a number of useful graphs and data on the Interstate Highway System.
- ◆ *“The Florida Department of Transportation”* at www.dot.state.fl.us. This site contains maps, plans for highway construction in Florida, travel information, as well as links to other useful sites.

Note: All web sites cited were available at the time this lesson was published.

Student Data Sheet

Name: _____

The Interstate: Pros and Cons

Date: _____

Background

While the Interstate Highway System has been the largest and most expensive public works program ever undertaken (yes, greater than the Pyramids or the Great Wall of China), many times it has been considered the most controversial. Traffic flow was greatly improved, reducing trips across states by several hours in some cases. Throughout the country, new commercial, industrial, and residential growth has developed due to the presence of the new roads. According to *Public Purpose, Highway and Motorway Fact Book* in its report on the 40th anniversary of the highway system,

“...the Interstate Highway System is an engine that has driven 40 years of unprecedented prosperity and positioned the United States to remain the world’s pre-eminent economic power. Positive economic impacts of the interstate highway are numerous. They have included:

- ◆ Lowered travel time and the increased reliability of shipment of goods at lower costs.
- ◆ Broadening the geographic range and options of shoppers, thus increasing competition among businesses while providing consumers with larger selections and lower prices.
- ◆ Less expensive land has been made available to businesses and homeowners. The result has been increased job opportunities and more affordable housing in the suburbs.

The average annual economic benefit of the Interstate is estimated at \$38 billion. Over the past 40 years it is estimated that reductions in costs to businesses and in prices to consumers have exceeded \$1 trillion – more than seven times the cost of the roadway. It is anticipated that the Interstate will continue to benefit the economy, particularly as trade between the United States, Mexico, and Canada increases.”

While the primary benefits of the Interstate Highway System have been economic, other benefits include:

- ◆ Time savings to travelers and workers, along with the resultant expansion of opportunity and mobility.
- ◆ Lower fatalities. The rate for fatalities on the Interstate is 60 percent lower than that of all other roads, a saving of 187,000 lives over 40 years.

- ◆ The interstate, built during the Cold War, continues to play a role in national defense. The U.S. Army cited the system as being vital to the success of the 1990-91 Desert Storm operation.

In addition to the superhighway's overall impact on the economy, you would recognize many of the businesses that owe, at least partially, their success to the growth of the interstate. McDonald's, Holiday Inn, Cracker Barrel, and a host of gasoline service-station franchises have grown along with the system. It is a rare stretch of interstate that does not boast many of these businesses at multiple interchanges.

Stop here and discuss the following questions with your group:

1. List economic benefits that have resulted from the building of the interstate.
2. What other benefits have Americans enjoyed as a consequence of the building of the interstate?

Record your group's answers to these questions in the first section of the **Activity2** edc resource file. If one person is recording the group's responses, the recorder should send the completed file to each member of the group at the end of this exercise. (Use the unit-to-unit cable to share the file.)

While Americans have benefited from the construction of the interstate, there have been some negative impacts. The increased traffic on the roadway has resulted in an increase in *smog*. These noxious carbon dioxide emissions from automobiles lead to poor air quality. Many scientists fear that our society's increased reliance on automobiles will contribute to the *greenhouse effect*, a global warming trend caused by smog and other pollutants that may eventually result in a hotter (and less livable) climate.

Continued reliance on automobiles also means continued dependence on oil, gasoline, and other petroleum products. Many of the sources of these products are foreign. Older Americans will remember the Middle Eastern oil embargo in 1973. The crisis was characterized by soaring fuel prices, significant gasoline shortages, and long lines of panicked motorists at gas stations vying for scarce resources. Many states adopted emergency measures to deal with the situation, including gas-rationing plans not seen since World War II. Congress lowered the speed limit on the nation's highways from 70 to 55 miles per hour. While these measures are no longer in effect, a similar crisis could result as long as we have a dependence on the automobile for mass transportation and must rely on dwindling supplies of oil.

Recall that the Interstate was built at a cost of \$129 billion and is in many places over 40 years old. The system has aged and is critically in need of repairs and improvements to ease congestion. The system was originally built to serve a nation of 170 million. Today, with a U.S. population of 270 million, the system is crumbling in many places. It is estimated that the cost to maintain the system will exceed \$3 billion a year. In the past, funds to build and maintain the interstates came from federal taxes on gasoline. As the system continues to age and deteriorate while the number of users continues to grow, additional sources of funding will be needed.

In a sense, the Interstate's popularity has led to one of its greatest problems - congestion. Commuters in many cities face drives of an hour or more from their homes in the suburbs to their workplaces in the city. The process is reversed at the end of the day as workers return home. The increased travel time and frustration have given rise to the terms *gridlock* and *road rage* being commonly used in daily television newscasts.

Americans also have begun to see the superhighways in a new light. Communities ask what the impact of the Interstate has been and will be. Beauty and environmental impact have become key issues. In urban regions, the highways have enhanced flight to the suburbs, often leaving the poor behind in blighted inner cities. These individuals also experience diminished job opportunities as businesses move out to the suburbs in search of more affluent customers. Likewise, businesses without the resources to relocate (so-called Mom 'n' Pop businesses) have failed as their customer base moves away. Many are saddened by the demise of "main street" America and disillusioned by the business environment along the interstate interchanges. These interchanges are characterized by what many consider to be crass, unlovely enterprises: fast-food restaurants and strip-malls.

Stop here and discuss the following questions with your group:

1. What problems have resulted from American dependence on the automobile?
2. How have the lives of Americans been shaped by the interstate?

Record your group's answers to these questions in the second section of the **Activity2** edc resource file. At this point, the recorder should send the completed file to all members of the group.

As America moves into the twentieth century, reliance on the Interstate Highway System is likely to increase rather than diminish. The interstate will continue to be central to the positive growth of the nation's economy. The mobility and freedom that Americans cherish will continue to be served by these roadways. However, complex issues such as pollution, congestion, and cost will plague the system. Real answers to the challenges facing the Interstate will only come from thinking ahead and planning creatively and insightfully.