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- Special to the Daily Leader

On Sept. 28 and 29, the Southwest Passage Initiative for Regional Interstate Transportation hosted its 14th annual conference in Guymon, Okla.

The SPIRIT grassroots effort for the past 14 years has been to promote the upgrading of U.S. Highway 54 to four-lane status from Wichita to El Paso, Texas.

This is one of the heaviest traveled two-lane highways in the country, and more than 40 percent of that traffic is heavy trucks.

U.S. Highway 54, given the status of "SPIRIT High Priority Corridor on the National Highway System" by the U.S. Congress, is a main trade link from Mexico and a major military route from El Paso to Wichita.

A reception took place at the "Bricks" starting at 5:30 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 28. It offered good food and visiting with friends from four states, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico plus from the representation of a U.S. senator in Washington.

At 7 a.m. Sept. 29, a full breakfast was served and furnished by the Townsman Inn. At 9:30, the program began at "Hunnys" with welcomes from the Guymon mayor.

The keynote address featured Gary Ridley, Oklahoma Department of Transportation Secretary from Oklahoma City. He reviewed the problems facing the future plans for building infrastructure because of the struggling economy throughout the United States. He then outlined several ways

that plans can continue and be funded in the future.

Throughout the morning, the audience heard about funding highway construction, construction methods and progress and plans by representatives from the four states. These included Chris Herrick with the Kansas Department of Transportation in Topeka, Kenneth Peter with the Texas Department of Transportation in Amarillo, Texas, and Robert Kurtz with the New Mexico Department of Transportation in Roswell, N.M.

A barbecue was served at "Hunnys," the location of the conference.

Kim Peterson and his crew prepared their famous barbecue spread, which was sponsored by Epic Touch.

A special presentation was made by Linda Barnett, Oklahoma Main Street executive director from Oklahoma City. She urged those in attendance to promote tourism and Main Street "Sightseeing" with their efforts in upgrading Highway 54.

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