Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance

Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 550

CDOT Route Nos. and Milepost (MP) Limits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CDOT Route</th>
<th>Route Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>550A</td>
<td>From the New Mexico State Line North To SH 160A Southeast of Durango</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>550B</td>
<td>From SH 160-A in Durango north via Molas Divide Silverton, Red Mountain Pass, and Ouray To SH 50-A and SH 90-B in Montrose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Highway Location:

Counties: Montrose, Ouray, San Juan, La Plata
Length (Miles): 124.489

OAHP Site Numbers (for previously recorded segments, if applicable)*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OAHP Site No.</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Assessment Date</th>
<th>Site Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5LP.1871</td>
<td>106 - Officially eligible&gt;Field eligible&gt;Field eligible&gt;Field needs data&gt;Field eligible</td>
<td>09/08/2006&gt;06/05/2006&gt;09/12/2001&gt;06/10/1991&gt;09/01/1985</td>
<td>RICO-ROCKWOOD WAGON ROAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5LP.6654</td>
<td>Field eligible</td>
<td>2/8/2002</td>
<td>US HIGHWAY 550, STATE HIGHWAY 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5LP.6654.1</td>
<td>Does not support eligibility of entire linear resource&gt;Officially not eligible&gt;Field not eligible&gt;Field not eligible</td>
<td>08/24/2011&gt;05/16/2003&gt;08/03/2011&gt;03/10/2002</td>
<td>US HIGHWAY 550 (SEGMENT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5MN.6047</td>
<td>Field eligible</td>
<td>2/8/2002</td>
<td>US HIGHWAY 550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5MN.6047.1</td>
<td>Supports eligibility of entire linear resource&gt;Field eligible&gt;Field Eligible for the State Register</td>
<td>07/02/2012&gt;08/15/2011&gt;08/15/2011</td>
<td>US HIGHWAY 550 - SEGMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.175.2</td>
<td>Field needs data&gt;</td>
<td>06/13/1980&gt;10/01/1979</td>
<td>MEARS OTTO TOLL ROAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.175.3</td>
<td>Field eligible</td>
<td>10/16/2000</td>
<td>OTTO MEARS TOLL ROAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.202</td>
<td>Field needs data</td>
<td>10/1/1979</td>
<td>ALKALI CREEK ROAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.294</td>
<td>Field eligible</td>
<td>2/8/2002</td>
<td>U. S. HIGHWAY 550, MIRACLE HIGHWAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.294.1</td>
<td>Field needs data</td>
<td>7/1/1980</td>
<td>U S HIGHWAY 550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.294.3</td>
<td>No assessment given on form</td>
<td>7/1/2008</td>
<td>U. S. HIGHWAY 550 - SEGMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.294.4</td>
<td>No assessment given on form</td>
<td>7/1/1980</td>
<td>U. S. HIGHWAY 550 - SEGMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.294.5</td>
<td>Does not support eligibility of entire linear resource&gt;Field eligible</td>
<td>06/26/2009&gt;04/16/2009</td>
<td>U.S. HIGHWAY 550 - SEGMENT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP
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Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 550

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OAHP Site No.</th>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>Assessment (If Applicable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5OR.294.8</td>
<td>106 - Officially eligible&gt;Contrib. to Officially elig. dist.&gt;Within NR district</td>
<td>02/02/2010&gt;01/21/2010&gt;10/06/1983 U.S. HIGHWAY 550, MIRACLE HIGHWAY - SEGMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.294.9</td>
<td>Does not support eligibility of entire linear resource&gt;Field eligible</td>
<td>01/27/2011&gt;01/11/2011 US HIGHWAY 550, MIRACLE HIGHWAY - SEGMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.464</td>
<td>Field needs data</td>
<td>6/1/1980 UNNAMED ROAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.469</td>
<td>Field needs data</td>
<td>6/1/1980 COUNTY ROAD 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5OR.63</td>
<td>Officially not eligible&gt;Field not eligible</td>
<td>07/15/1981&gt;07/15/1981 OLD MILLION DOLLAR HIGHWAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5SA.112.2</td>
<td>Officially not eligible&gt;No assessment given on form</td>
<td>06/02/2005&gt;10/16/2003 SILVERTON RAILROAD (SEGMENT), SILVERTON AND RED MOUNTAIN RAILROAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5SA.113</td>
<td>106 - Officially eligible&gt;No assessment given on form&gt;Field eligible</td>
<td>12/26/2012&gt;01/01/1974&gt;02/08/2002 MILLION DOLLAR HIGHWAY, RED MOUNTAIN PASS, SILVERTON SAN JUAN TOLL ROAD, DURANGO-SILVERTON-OURAY HIGHWAY, US HIGHWAY 550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5SA.113.3</td>
<td>106 - Officially eligible&gt;No assessment given on form</td>
<td>06/02/2005&gt;10/16/2003 SILVERTON SAN JUAN TOLL ROAD, SILVERTON AND OURAY TOLL ROAD SEGMENT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5SA.113.4</td>
<td>Supports eligibility of entire linear resource&gt;106 - Officially eligible&gt;Field eligible</td>
<td>02/03/2010&gt;10/02/2006&gt;08/22/2006 U.S. HIGHWAY 550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5SA.113.5</td>
<td>Field eligible</td>
<td>8/31/2007 MILLION DOLLAR HIGHWAY, US 550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5SA.79</td>
<td>Field needs data</td>
<td>9/22/1986 WEIR WAGON ROAD~UTE TRAIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion of Site Forms (for previously recorded segments, if applicable):

Four segments documented for this route, 5LP.6654.1, 5MN.6047.1, 5OR.294.1, 5SA.958.1, were completed for Highways to the Sky (Associated Cultural Resource Experts, 2002), which comprise the highway between Montrose and the New Mexico state line. Several of the Colorado Cultural Resource Inventory forms (forms) available on Compass, such as 5OR.294.5 and 5OR.294.9, conclude that previously recorded segments no longer contribute to the overall significance of the entire route. This is because of loss of integrity due to major modifications such as roadway widening from two to four lanes, intersection improvements, turn lanes, rock wall blasting, or realignments to straighten out curves. Forms such as 5OR.294.7-Ouray Tunnel, 5SA.113.2, and 5SA.113.4, conclude other previously recorded segments do contribute to the significance of the overall route because they represent the remaining intact original alignment of the highway from the 1920s and reflect bold engineering solutions of the period to address extreme challenges associated with constructing highway mountain passes. Extant segments of the toll road may have been bypassed and have been identified in forms for previously recorded segments such as 5SA.113.3 and 5OR.63. In 2009, a graduate student at University of New Mexico in the Department of Anthropology, Adam Stasko, prepared a nomination for the portion of the highway between Durango and Ouray in La Plata, San Juan and Ouray counties, which has become known as the Million Dollar Highway. The nomination has not been finalized for listing in the state and national registers. It recommended listing the highway from Durango to Ouray primarily under Criterion C as an impressive engineering achievement, under Criterion B for its association with Otto Mears, and under Criterion A for its significance in the areas of Transportation and Entertainment/Recreation.

Historic Districts located within 250 feet of highway (OAHP Site Number and Name)*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OAHP Site No.</th>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>Assessment (If Applicable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5MN.2724</td>
<td>Listed on National Register</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP
Highway Name:  U.S. Highway (US) 550

Historical Data:
Forms for previously recorded segments of this highway were reviewed for historical background information (see OAHP Site Numbers above). In addition, a historical summary of this highway is included in Highways to the Sky. This information was used to complete the statement of significance. One item is noted below from the historical summary in Highways to the Sky related to the periods of significance.

In 1916 the State and Ouray County started the first construction project with improvements to the road north of Ouray. After Molas Divide was paved in 1957, the entire route had a hard paved surface, and in 1958, the Ouray Tunnel was widened but the original tunnel design remained intact.

See Colorado Cultural Resource Inventory forms and Chapter 11 of Highways to the Sky for additional historical information on this highway.

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Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance

Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 550

☐ Not Significant - No historical significance identified
☑ Significant - Historical significance identified (see details below)

Property Type and Areas of Significance:
A detailed explanation why this highway possesses historical significance is provided in the Significance Statement below.

Cultural:
Criterion A specific requirements
☐ Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
☐ Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
☐ Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements
☐ Representative example (Transportation)

Engineering: ☑
Subtypes
☐ Farm-to-Market Road
☐ Limited Access, Multiple-Lane, Divided Highway/Freeway
☐ Highway Bypass

Criterion A specific requirements
☑ Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
☑ Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
☐ Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements
☑ Representative example (Transportation)
☐ Engineering achievement (Engineering)

Aesthetic: ☑
 Criterion A specific requirements
☑ Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
☐ Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
☐ Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements
☐ Representative example (Transportation)
☑ Engineering achievement (Engineering)
☐ Landscape architecture (Landscape Architecture)

*Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP

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Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 550

Historic periods of highway construction:

- Pre-territorial (pre-1861)
- Territorial and pre-automobile state roads (1861-1890)
- Automobile age (1890-1930)
- Depression and World War II (1930-1945)
- Postwar Interstate Era (1945-1973)
- Completion and Augmentation of Interstate System (1973-2000)

Level of Significance:

- Local
- State
- National

Significance Statement:

US 550 is classified as an Engineered Route and an Aesthetic Route under the classification system in the MPS.

**Criterion A**

As an Engineered Route, the toll road reflects an early road project that provided important and primary access for mining activities in the San Juan Mountains and opened this previously inaccessible region of the state. As such, segments of the toll road also possess significance under Criterion A in the area of Transportation at the state level. In 1887 the toll road was turned over to the state and counties, after travelers complained of excessive toll charges. Toll roads from the territorial and pre-automobile era are rare and few surviving examples of this type have been identified and evaluated.

As an Aesthetic Route, US 550 possesses significance under Criterion A in the area of Transportation at the state level of significance. US 550 was an early and prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (CHD). The State and San Juan County took over maintenance of the road in 1887, and by 1910 the CHD had designated the route as a state highway. Major improvements began during the 1920s, continuing into the post-World War II era, and resulted in this route being designated as a scenic highway and later, as a Colorado Scenic and Historic Byway. In particular, the 12-mile section (mileposts 80-92) through the Uncompahgre Gorge south of Ouray, including the Ouray Tunnel to Red Mountain Pass, allowed the road to remain open year-round and is considered a prominent project because it was designed to enhance the motorist experience through the San Juan Mountains. One of the contractors who built the road called it “the million dollar highway,” referring to the overall cost and because it was one of the costliest projects of its time. Over the years, the Million Dollar Highway designation has expanded to refer to the segment of the route between Durango and Ouray, or mileposts 20.5 to 92.

**Criterion B**

According to the MPS, it is very rare for a highway to be significant under Criterion B: “Criterion B is applicable if a highway is associated with historically important persons other than the designer or builder; associations with the designer or builder are addressed under Criterion C” (2003: Associated Cultural Resource Experts, Section F-2). Previous site forms have noted that the route of US 550 is associated with Otto Mears, a railroad and toll road builder, who completed the road construction that had been started by Ouray County, and constructed the road in San Juan County. Mears owned the road between 1882 and 1887, collecting high tolls, until the counties forced him to give it up. Mears was involved with many investments related to industry and transportation in the San Juan Mountains, including the construction of the railroad that connected Durango and Silverton. His involvement is better expressed under Criterion C, as one of the builders of the early road. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion B for its association with Otto Mears.

**Criterion C**

As an Engineered Route, segments of US 550 possess significance under Criterion C in the area of Transportation at the state level of significance as a representative example of toll road construction led by Otto Mears, prior to the involvement of the CHD. The toll road reflects early roadway engineering efforts initiated by Mears between 1882 and 1883, which provided important and primary access for mining activities in the San Juan Mountains and
Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 550

opened this previously inaccessible region of the state.

As an aesthetic Route, US 550 possesses significance under Criterion C in the area of Engineering at the state level of significance. In 1924 the CHD opened the redesigned and improved the 12-mile section through the San Juan Mountains, known as the Million Dollar Highway, and constructed the Ouray Tunnel. These improvements exemplify bold engineering solutions by the CHD to address the extreme challenges associated with constructing highway mountain passes.

Criterion D
For a property to possess significance for information potential, the information yielded by the property must answer specific important research questions that cannot be otherwise answered. The technology of highway construction is well understood and documented. As such, this highway is unlikely to yield important information that cannot be discerned from archived plans and other records. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion D.
Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance

Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 550

*Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP

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