

**Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance**

**Highway Name:** State Highway (SH) 97

**CDOT Route Nos. and Milepost (MP) Limits:**

<i>CDOT Route</i>	<i>Route Description</i>
097A	From SH 141-A in Naturita north To Third Ave in Nucla

**Highway Location:**

Counties: Montrose  
Length (Miles): 4.553

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

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Assessment Date</i>	<i>Site Name</i>
None	No previously recorded segments are found on or adjacent to this highway		

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

No Colorado Cultural Resources Inventory forms for previously recorded segments of this highway were identified in Compass.

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

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>District Name</i>	<i>Assessment (If Applicable)</i>
None	No historic districts are found on or adjacent to this highway	

*\*Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP*

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### Historical Data:

SH 97 is approximately 4.5 miles long and extends between SH 141 at Naturita north to Nucla. Southwestern Colorado is a generally mountainous region that owes much of its history to mining. The earliest transportation corridors in southwest Colorado were wagon roads that often followed trails established by Native Americans, explorers, fur trappers, and traders. The Colorado Gold Rush of 1859 brought an influx of people to Colorado's southwestern region in search of fortune and led to the establishment of mining camps through the area to supply activities at the mines and those working in the mines. Towns like Silverton, Placerville, and Ouray began as mining camps and supply centers for mining districts. Ouray was established in 1875 and boomed throughout the 1880s after silver deposits were discovered in nearby hills. Other towns like Mineral Point and Capital City served specific mines instead of larger mining areas. Gold, silver, lead, and zinc were mined at various periods throughout the region. Uranium mining became an important industry in the post-World War II Era with mines located at Naturita (Colorado State Planning Commission 1941; 141, 426; Ubbelohde et al 2006; 175-177; Colorado Cultural Resource Survey Inventory Form SH 141 (5MN.6048).

Early roads in the region were often built to serve and connect mining camps with nearby mining districts and communities for the movement of people and the transfer of commercial and agricultural goods. The sometimes narrow and rocky canyons combined with the altitude of this mountainous region made road building expensive, dangerous, and difficult. To help finance road construction, toll roads were common in the late nineteenth century prior to the establishment of the Colorado Highway Department. Local residents would often pool resources to build roads. Other roads were financed by wealthy individuals such as Otto Mears, an important figure in the history of road-building in southwestern Colorado. Mears constructed early toll roads between Saguache and Lake City, over Poncha Pass, and between Ouray and Silverton. His influence on road-building in southwestern Colorado is best represented by the construction of the Million Dollar Highway, current U.S. Highway (US) 550, which reflects early and bold efforts to establish roads in the region employing innovative engineering to meet the challenges of the terrain and altitude. Examples of other roads that reflect notable early road-building efforts to traverse mountainous areas of the state, such as early crossings of the continental divide, include SH 9, 17, 84, 160, and 389 among others. (Ubbelohde et al 2006; 175-177; Wyckoff 1999; 53-54).

In 1904 the Colorado Cooperative Company established the community of Nucla as a cooperative colony. This location of the community was five miles north of Naturita at Nucla and was accessed by a road that appears to follow present-day SH 97. The Colorado Cooperative Company was part of the larger national cooperative movement in the U.S. in which utopian colonies were founded based on principles of communal living. The impacts of the larger cooperative movement in Colorado include the efforts of the Colorado Cooperative Colony, which established the Union Colony, later renamed Greeley, in 1870 and later the Colorado Cooperative Company, which established Nucla. First named Pinon and later Nucla, the community was established as the result of the efforts of the Colorado Cooperative Company, which was incorporated earlier in 1894. Nucla operated as a camp and attracted hundreds communal settlers in the late nineteenth century. The work of the Colorado Cooperative Company included construction of an irrigation ditch to convey water to farms in Tabeguache Park, along with other community services and infrastructure. In 1904 the Nucla Town Improvement was organized. Later the Colorado Cooperative Company became the Colorado Ditch Company, which continues to provide water to Nucla. The Colorado Cooperative Company petitioned the Montrose County Commissioners to build a road between Paradox and Montrose, which resulted in the predecessor of SH 90, the Paradox Road. (Frontier in Transition: A History of Southwestern Colorado; Ubbelohde et al 2006; 175-177; Wyckoff 1999; 53, Colorado State Planning Commission 1941; 423-425; Clark 1999; Denver Public Library 2013; Site Form 5MN8199.1).

The development of utopian communities as part of the cooperative movement is an important theme in history as it relates to social history and community development and the construction of the predecessor of SH 97 provided direct access to Nucla and the activities of the Colorado Cooperative Company north of Naturita.

The popularity of the automobile increased dramatically throughout the state between 1910 and 1920. The Good Roads Movement and founding of the Colorado Highway Department in the first decades of the twentieth century led to the establishment of a highway network throughout the region and state (Carter and Mehls 1984: 138-141). Notable road development in this area occurred in 1921 when local officials in Grand Junction located to the north of SH 97, decided to stimulate the economy by building two vehicular roads out of the city, one of them extending south to the Paradox Valley located west of Naturita, which crossed one of the world's richest deposits of uranium, vanadium, and radium. In 1947 the Bureau of Public roads and the Atomic Energy Commission established a program to improve access between mines near Naturita and refining facilities in Grand Junction. Nearby SH 141, which extends through Naturita, served as an important transportation corridor throughout the Cold War for

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transporting uranium within the region. Research did not find that SH 97 provided important connections for the mining industry in the region - this theme is better illustrated by SH 141.

Historic state highway maps indicate that a road between Naturita and Nucla was established by 1916. By 1926 the stretch of road between Naturita and Nucla was designated SH 97 and had a similar corridor to its present-day alignment (Frontier in Transition: A History of Southwestern Colorado). Road building in mountainous areas addressed challenging terrain and high altitude passes; however, no information was found to indicate the design, engineering, or construction of this highway differed from other roads in the region. This road appears to have developed to provide direct and early access to Nucla, which is associated with the cooperative movement in Colorado in the late nineteenth century. The cooperative movement, the irrigation infrastructure that resulted from these efforts, and the development of Nucla is an important theme in the history of Colorado.

(Unless otherwise indicated, sources used in the preparation of this section included state highway maps, the Highways of Colorado by Matthew Salek, Highways to the Sky: A Context and History of Colorado's Highway System, Colorado State Roads and Highways, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Submission, plans in the Online Transportation Information System (OTIS), and site forms for previously surveyed resources in Compass when available.)

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**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)

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### 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:

SH 97 is classified as an Engineered Route under the classification system in the MPS.

#### *Criterion A*

The road corridor that eventually became SH 97 was constructed by 1916, just a few years after the establishment of the Colorado Highway Department (CHD) and is associated with the development of Nucla, the Colorado Cooperative Company, and the cooperative movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Colorado. The route is significant under Criterion A under Transportation at the state level because the highway appears to follow a route that provided early and direct access to these important historic themes related to Community Planning and Development at the state level. Although the road connects to SH 141, which was an important transportation corridor for uranium mining in post-World War II Era, research did not reveal that SH 97 was an important or integral to the transportation of uranium or other mining or agricultural products locally or throughout the region. In addition research did not indicate the road was built or improved as part of a Depression-era federal work relief program.

#### *Criterion B*

Research did not reveal this highway to be directly associated with the events or work of a person important in history, nor does research indicate the highway represents the efforts of a specific individual to secure construction of this highway for the economic development of a community or area of the state. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion B.

#### *Criterion C*

Research and literature review yielded no evidence to indicate the use of innovative or important engineering techniques that serve to distinguish this highway from other roads within mountainous areas of the state. The highway's design and construction appear to have utilized techniques common to other roads in mountainous areas. Overall this highway appears to reflect the standard types of design and construction practices and it does not appear to possess significance under Criterion C.

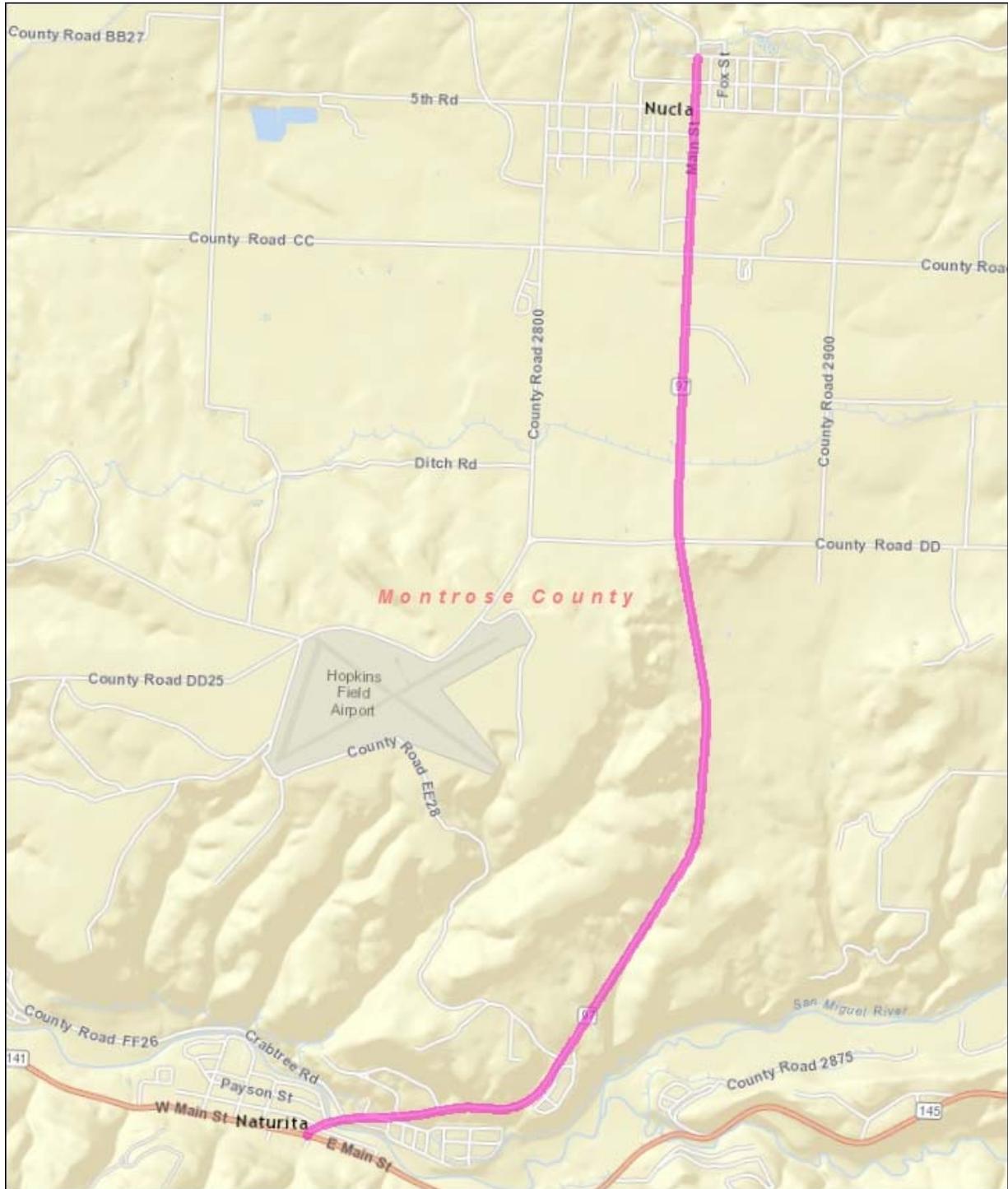
#### *Criterion D*

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.

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- SH 97
- County Boundary

SH 97

Map indicates the extent of the highway based on CDOT GIS data; portions co-signed with other highways may not be indicated.