

Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance

Highway Name: State Highway (SH) 17

CDOT Route Nos. and Milepost (MP) Limits:

<i>CDOT Route</i>	<i>Route Description</i>
017A	From the New Mexico State Line northeast via Cumbres Pass To U.S. 285A south of Antonit
017B	From U.S. 160 A east of Alamosa North To U.S. 285 B Northwest of Mineral Hot Springs

Highway Location:

Counties: Alamosa, Archuleta, Conejos, Saguache
Length (Miles): 88.641

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 (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 17 consists of two discontinuous segments in south-central Colorado that together measure approximately 89 miles long. One segment extends north from the New Mexico state line over Cumbres Pass to U.S. Highway (US) 285 at Antonito. The other segment extends between SH 160 at Alamosa through the center of the San Luis Valley to US 285 near Mineral Hot Springs.

The earliest transportation corridors in south-central Colorado were wagon roads that often followed trails established by Native Americans. Settlers from New Mexico moved into the San Luis Valley in the 1850s and established early irrigation and water reclamation systems to facilitate agricultural production. The San Luis Valley developed into a center for agriculture and livestock-raising within the region beginning in the mid-nineteenth century (Carter and Mehls 1984: 46-48).

Railroad construction began in southern Colorado during the 1860s. The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad (D&RG) was organized in 1870 and construction on tracks south of Denver began that same year. The D&RG reached the San Luis Valley by 1877 and expanded throughout the valley over the next several decades connecting communities to larger markets; D&RG tracks reached Alamosa in 1878, a line was constructed from Alamosa to Espanola, New Mexico in 1880 and from Antonito over Cumbres Pass to Chama, New Mexico, in 1880, and tracks connecting Salida and the San Luis Valley were established in 1881. The San Luis Valley Southern Railroad was constructed between Monte Vista and Center in 1913. Railroads served as an important means for distributing livestock and agricultural products throughout the San Luis Valley and beyond (Carter and Mehls 1984: 46-48, 79-81).

The popularity of the automobile increased dramatically between 1910 and 1920. The Good Roads Movement and establishment of the Colorado Highway Commission 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). Early routes across the Continental Divide included wagon roads and unimproved roads between New Mexico and Archuleta County in Colorado. Subsequent efforts to establish permanent roads across the Continental Divide began as early as 1913 when the Colorado legislature initiated the creation of a highway (SH 15) across the Continental Divide in southern Colorado, which is located to the north of SH 17. Present-day SH 17 consists of two discontinuous segments. The southernmost segment of present-day SH 17 is the earliest of the two segments and crosses the Continental Divide and once included portions of current SH 84. Historic state highway maps and 1920s journal articles indicate that a toll road following the same general alignment as current SH 17 between the New Mexico state line and Antonito was in place by 1919. This southern segment of SH 17 goes over Cumbres Pass, an important transportation corridor through the San Juan Mountains that crosses the Continental Divide in southern Colorado. Interest in constructing a route over the Continental Divide via Cumbres Pass began in earnest in 1920 when the State Highway Department and the Secretary of Agriculture drew up plans for the survey and construction of the highway along with estimates for the 15 mile segment between Antonito and New Mexico. The survey was completed in 1921 by Louis A. Hamilton. The center line had a maximum six percent grade and general minimum radius of curvature not less than 100 feet. Plans drawn up called for a 14-foot-wide earth-graded road and the contract for 8.5 miles was awarded to Ed O'Neil of Meeker, Colorado. The road was designated SH 17 and was opened to traffic in 1924. The route extended southeast from Pagosa Springs, crossed into northern New Mexico, then re-entered Colorado and went over Cumbres Pass through Conejos, Alamosa, and then north through the San Luis Valley to Mineral Hot Springs, near its present-day terminus. The segment through the San Luis Valley was stair-stepped and generally remained as such until the 1950s when this portion was no longer designated as SH 17. A 1924 article from Colorado Highways mentions the highway as important for opening up scenic parts of the state to motorists and for providing a shorter travel route than other existing highways between the San Luis Valley and the San Juan Valley. Prior to its construction, western highway enthusiasts viewed its construction as pivotal to the industrial development of southwestern Colorado. A 1925 Colorado Highways article cited many important benefits of the new highway, including increased trade of natural and manufactured commercial products between the San Juan Valley and the San Luis Valley access to previously isolated areas of the state deemed valuable for their scenic characteristics and recreational opportunities like fishing and motoring; and the access it provided to tourists visiting Mesa Verde National Park further to the west ("New State Roads Open Beautiful Motorist Routes," Colorado Highways (December 1924): 10; "Cumbres Pass Open to Traffic," Colorado Highways (June and July 1925): 6-7, 24).

The section between New Mexico and Alamosa was co-signed with US 285 between 1935 and 1942. The segment between Pagosa Springs and New Mexico was also redesignated US 84 in the 1940s. Segments co-signed with US highways were eliminated in 1968 leaving the two present-day sections of SH 17 and the entirety of the route was paved by 1970.

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(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 17 is classified as an Aesthetic and Engineered Route under the classification system in the MPS.

Criterion A

SH 17 was established in 1924 in order to provide a transportation corridor between the San Juan Valley and San Luis Valley. Once constructed, this highway, especially the southern portion that crosses Cumbres Pass, served as an important transportation corridor across the Continental Divide that facilitated increased commerce, trade, and tourism in a previously isolated part of the region. This highway facilitated development of recreational activities in the area like fishing and motoring and also provided tourists with easier access to Mesa Verde National Park. For these reasons, this highway possesses significance in the areas of Transportation and Entertainment/Recreation at the local level. In addition, the northern segment of SH 17 extends through the San Luis Valley adjacent to the former D&RG railroad corridor and served as an important farm-to-market road within the valley and provided a direct connection for conveying agricultural goods to market centers and prominent transportation corridors within the region at the local level. As such, the road also possesses significance as a farm-to-market road. Although not considered an early project by the Colorado Highway Department (CHD), this highway is considered a prominent project by the CHD due to the involvement of the Secretary of Agriculture in the planning and construction of the route and for the connections that it made throughout the region. As such, this highway possesses significance in the area of Transportation at the state level under Criterion A. No evidence was found to indicate that the highway was built or improved as part of a federal relief project.

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

This highway is considered a prominent project of the CHD as indicated by the involvement of the Secretary of Agriculture in its survey and construction. Cumbres Pass and the portion of the road that traverses the Continental Divide may exhibit early and important engineering design or construction techniques that serve to distinguish this portion of the highway from other roads. Because of this, the highway's design and construction appear to fall outside the established standard practices of state highway design and construction of the time and these portions of the road appear to possess significance under Criterion C as a representative example.

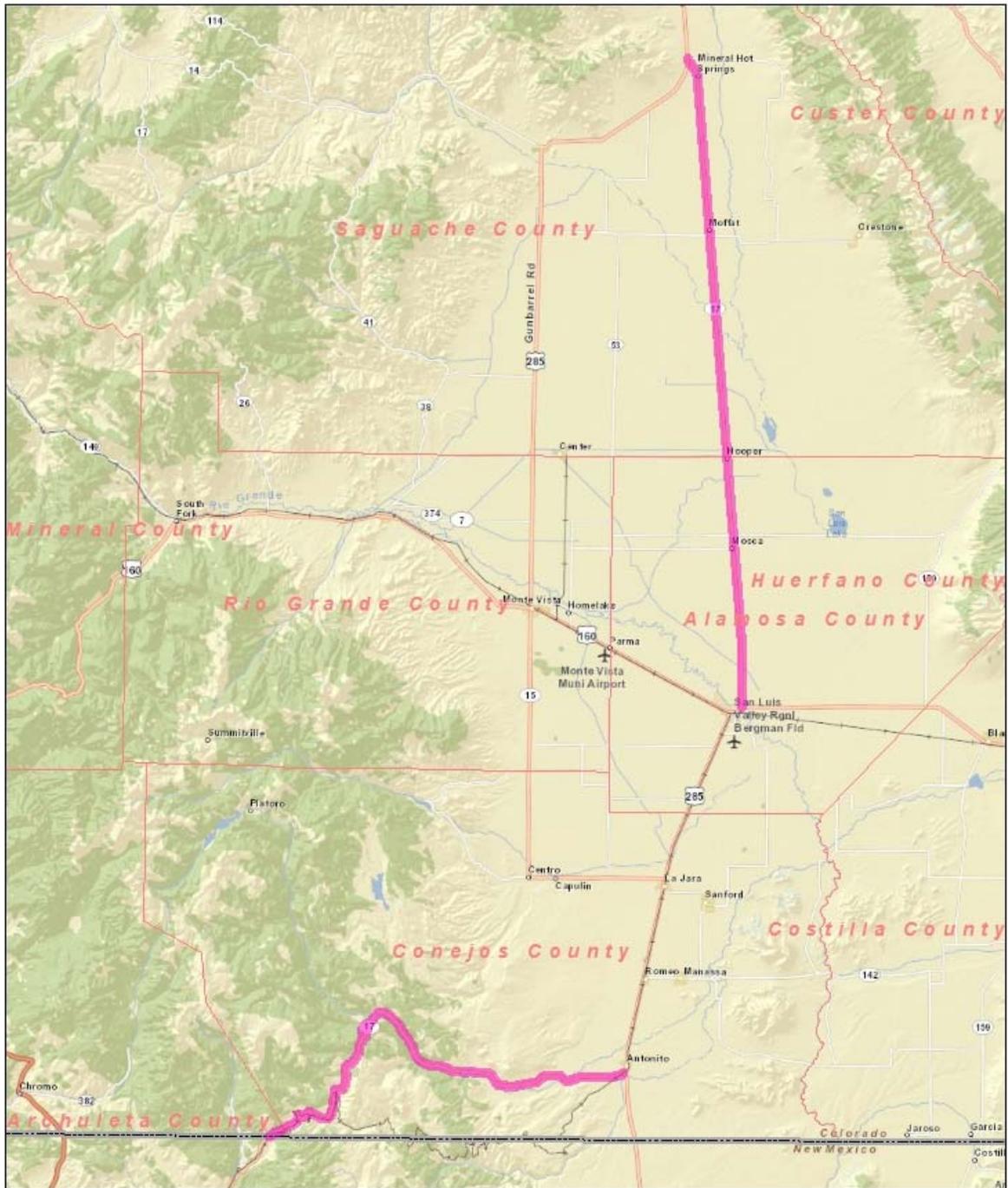
Criterion D

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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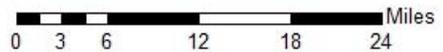
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- SH 17
- State Boundary
- County Boundary



SH 17



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