



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

NEWS

ROD R. BLAGOJEVICH – GOVERNOR

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Gov. Blagojevich renames a portion of I-57 “Ken Gray Expressway” to honor long-time Congressman

Congressman’s dedication to southern Illinois helped build highways, hospitals and Rend Lake

FRANKLIN COUNTY – Governor Rod R. Blagojevich today renamed a section of Interstate 57 in honor of longtime southern Illinois Congressman Kenneth J. Gray. From now on, I-57 between Mile Post 0, at the Illinois State Line to Mile Post 106, at the Marion/Jefferson County Line will be known as “Ken Gray Expressway.” Signs will be placed in each direction, signifying this honor for the influential former member of Congress, who represented southern Illinois for nearly a quarter of a century in Washington, D.C.

“This portion of highway I-57 serves as a dedication to Congressman Gray for his lifetime of service to the people of southern Illinois and to this country,” said Gov. Blagojevich. “I stand with the people of southern Illinois to extend our gratitude and respect to this great statesman who brought us the beauty of Rend Lake, the security of having quality hospitals nearby and the economic resources this wonderful highway system has provided. I am honored to rename this portion of highway after Ken Gray.”

In 1956, during his first term in U.S Congress, Gray was instrumental in urging President Dwight D. Eisenhower to sign legislation creating the Interstate highway system, including I-57 which runs through southern Illinois. During his tenure in the U.S House of Representatives, Congressman Gray secured \$7 billion in federal funds for southern Illinois, including: three Interstate highways, a federal prison in Marion, and the scenic Rend Lake. He also sponsored legislation that helped bring 120 post offices, nursing homes, hospitals, and other infrastructure to southern Illinois.

“I’m honored to be able to receive this award, and I consider it an award, because I worked 52 years to get it,” Congressman Gray remarked. “52 years ago, I sponsored the Highway Bill, to give us 42,500 miles of Interstate. A couple of years later, I put in 1,000 miles more, so I would be able to get Interstate 24 here. This is a great honor and I am very humbled to receive it.”

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After helping draft the Interstate Highway Act, Gray discovered there were no Interstate highways slated for southern Illinois. Knowing the need for economic improvement and commerce for the rural southern communities, Gray fought for I-57 to become a reality. On June 29, 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act, which included I-57.

“Ken Gray was a pioneer for the highway system in Illinois,” said Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) Secretary, Milton R. Sees. “His diligence and foresight contributed greatly to the infrastructure you see in Illinois, today. It is a pleasure to be able to name this stretch of Interstate 57 in his honor.”

In 1955, at age 30, Ken Gray became one of the youngest members ever to serve in Congress and the youngest member serving at that time. He served ten consecutive terms, from 1955 to 1974, and also served from 1985 to 1989. During that time, he was known for his flamboyant wardrobe, humor, amicability, and a fierce passion for bringing federal funds to southern Illinois. Gray escorted seven Presidents to southern Illinois, including John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan.

“Honoring Congressman Gray, a personal friend of mine, is long overdue and something I have been working on for several months now,” said Sen. Gary Forby (D-59th District). “Doing this for him only serves as a fraction of the recognition we owe him for his many years of dedicated service to southern Illinois.”

“I have known Mr. Gray since I was a child, and he is one of the main influences for building southern Illinois,” said Rep. Brandon Phelps (D-118th District). “We owe this honor to him, for his efforts through his many years of service.”

“Ken Gray was the economic engine that drove economic development in the southern Illinois region,” said Ed Smith, President of Ullico, Inc. and former Vice President of the Laborers’ International Union Local 773. “No one created more jobs for people who could raise their families, here, and it is fitting that we honor him for his hard work.”

Born in West Frankfort, Illinois in 1924, Congressman Gray lied about his age in order to enlist in World War II, where he served in three different combat arenas and was discharged as a First Sergeant. He used those skills in becoming the first Congressman to pilot his own helicopter, which he used to serve his large district. Gray has been awarded three Bronze Star Medals, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, the World War II Victory Medal, and Marksman Badge with carbine bar for his service to his country. In 1974, Gray became the first honorary citizen of the City of Carbondale. He lives in West Frankfort with his wife, Rev. Margaret “Toedy” Holley-Gray.

Built in the 1950s, I-57 is the longest Interstate running through Illinois, spanning from Miner, Missouri to Chicago. The Federal Aid Highway Act also made southern Illinois home to I-64 and I-24.