

Area legislators: Funding for roads essential

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The General Assembly's lack of action on transportation needs is causing a crisis in Virginia, according to state Sen. Roscoe Reynolds.

"Until we're willing to bite the bullet" and discuss possible ways to generate revenue for highway needs, those needs will persist, Reynolds, D-Ridgeway, said during the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce's annual Post-Legislative Affairs Breakfast on Thursday.

"You cannot build roads for free," said Del. Ward Armstrong, D-Collinsville. "We've got to have the revenue to do that."

He and Reynolds hinted that higher taxes might be needed to pay for road construction and maintenance.

Del. Don Merricks, R-Pittsylvania County, said taxpayers in his 16th District, which includes parts of Henry County and Martinsville, should contact him to tell him what they want lawmakers to do to fund transportation needs.

For instance, he said, would people prefer that lawmakers raise the gasoline tax, raise the state sales tax or find a funding source other than raising taxes?

Reynolds said he wants to see construction start on Interstate 73, which is to run through Henry County east of Martinsville. But there essentially is "no funding for the foreseeable future," he said, to either build that highway or finish widening U.S. 58 between Stuart and Hillsville to four lanes.

About \$13.3 million, mostly in federal funds, so far has been allocated for I-73. But the Commonwealth Transportation Board has not yet committed to placing the interstate in its six-year plan for transportation projects, so funds to begin construction have not yet been appropriated.

Del. Danny Marshall, R-Danville, said Gov. Tim Kaine took \$180 million out of the Transportation Trust Fund and put it into the state's general fund because he perceived a lack of transportation needs to justify the money.

"Bull!" he said, mentioning I-73 and the U.S. 58 widening as examples of local needs.

The General Assembly has been focused more on highway needs in Northern Virginia and the Tidewater region than elsewhere in the state, said Armstrong, the House minority leader.

Having been Virginia's main manufacturing region for a century, Southside is "entitled to the resources we need," he said, adding that he recently "pitched a fit" in front of lawmakers to get that point across to them.

Armstrong said if he is going to be concerned at all about transportation needs in other parts of the state, lawmakers from those regions "need to be concerned about ours."

This year's regular session of the General Assembly ended March 13. Now, some lawmakers are participating in a special session as conferees working out details of a higher education bond package, according to Anna McClain, Armstrong's legislative aide.

All lawmakers will be called back to Richmond on April 23 to vote on the bond package, she said.

Kaine said Wednesday he has been discussing a new transportation package with General Assembly leaders, although he offered no details. He said he will introduce the plan during a special legislative session this spring.

However, that session has not yet been scheduled, Armstrong said during the breakfast, held at the Best Western Martinsville Inn.