

Board OKs road request

Despite opposition from area business leaders
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The Henry County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to ask the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) for a connector road between the U.S. 58/220 Bypass and the soon to be expanded Patriot Centre.

It did so in spite of appeals from several people, including businessmen with companies in the Patriot Centre, that the board instead ask the CTB to move the route of the proposed Interstate 73 closer to Martinsville.

Supervisors Chairman H.G. Vaughn of the Ridgeway District has argued that the connector is needed because I-73 might be decades away and the businesses in the Patriot Centre need access to better roads soon to serve the expanding park. The county is purchasing an additional 1,200 acres for it.

The connector would create a quick route to both U.S. 58, which is being four-laned across Southside Virginia, and U.S. 220, he has said. It also would connect businesses to I-77 and I-81 via U.S. 58, he has said.

The businessmen and others, however, argued that starting I-73 near the Martinsville Speedway and running up to the Patriot Centre would be better for businesses because the Patriot Centre would have direct access to an interstate highway. The route they support follows the same lines as one proposed by businessman Max Kendall and calls for the upgrades to existing roads.

Skip Ressel, one of the group who spoke for the change to I-73, said he was disappointed with the supervisors' action. He said a survey has been done that shows most businesses want Kendall's route and also a poll taken of the public shows support for it.

"They aren't representing the people," he said of the supervisors.

Ressel said it would not cost the supervisors anything to ask the transportation board to reconsider the route and that Dana Martin, the CTB board member for this area, has said he would try to bring it before the CTB if the supervisors asked for it.

Lisa Price Hughes, VDOT resident engineer, said she could say with 100 percent certainty that now that federal approval of environmental and other tests, called a "record

of decision,” has been reached, the testing process would have to start over and delay the project if the route was changed.

But Ressel said that the plan would not only cost less money because it uses existing roads, it would be finished years sooner.

Ressel said that because the connector would use state funds, instead of mostly federal funds like I-73, it would compete with projects that are a higher priority for local legislators, such as finishing the four-laning of U.S. 58.

John Braziel, plant engineer for Commonwealth Laminating and Coating in the Patriot Centre, spoke in support of the change to the I-73 route. He said it would be a shame to spend state money when the federal money is available.

Jay Edelen, vice president of J.G. Edelen Co. in the Patriot Centre, said he thought the route to access the Patriot Centre will be crucial for businesses there.

“It would be better served if it is I-73 that is going by the Patriot Centre instead of just a state connecting route,” he said.

Clay Campbell, president of Martinsville Speedway, said he thought the supervisors’ proposal for a connector was a “great idea” but the I-73 change makes more economic sense, even if it takes longer.

“Let’s do it right the first time and look toward the future,” he said.

Kendall also spoke against the connector.

“They’re not likely to let you take funds away from 58 and put it on a connector road,” he said.

Before the board voted to approve the resolution, Vaughn said that securing Henry County’s economic future cannot wait on the uncertainties of I-73, which is almost completely unfunded, except for \$9 million for a 3.6 mile section in Henry County, and currently the subject of a lawsuit.

“We cannot wait for I-73 and we cannot wait for lawsuits,” he said. “We can’t wait on I-73 to help our businesses and be our salvation.”

He said that if VDOT can be convinced to use “common sense,” it will build the connector to interstate standards and then, when I-73 comes about, the connector would be incorporated as part of the route through Henry County.

Reed Creek District Supervisor Andy Parker agreed with Vaughn that was an option. He also said he would like to have Dana Martin come before the board and discuss issues surrounding changing the route of I-73.

Horsepasture District Supervisor Debra Buchanan said if the connector does become part of I-73, that would be the “best of both worlds.”

At its Tuesday meeting, the Martinsville City Council also approved a resolution in support of the connector