

Board wants I-73 change

Supervisors will ask state officials to reconsider route

Jay Edelen

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By SHAWN HOPKINS - Bulletin Staff Writer

The Henry County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to ask state officials to consider moving the route of I-73 through Henry County to an alignment that will better serve an expanding Patriot Centre and other businesses.

The board approved a resolution that asks the Commonwealth Transportation Board and Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to re-open consideration of the route.

It also asks them to incorporate a proposed Patriot Centre connector road, which would connect the Patriot Centre to the U.S. 58/U.S. 220 Bypass, into I-73 and change the I-73 route to provide better access to the Martinsville Speedway and Martinsville Industrial Park.

Dana Martin, the Commonwealth Transportation Board member for this region, has said the only way he will bring a requested change to the route before the CTB is if the supervisors asked for it.

The board voted to approve the resolution after hearing a presentation supporting a similar plan from Jay Edelen, vice president of J.G. Edelen Co., and attorney Reid Young with Blue Ridge Aquaculture.

In addition to their companies, the statement Edelen presented was signed by officials from Bowles Properties, Commonwealth Laminating, Martinsville Speedway, West Window Corp. and Millard's Machinery.

Also, Edelen and Young gave the board a petition containing what they said were 185 signatures from other business owners supporting the proposal. Many businessmen and others also attended the meeting to show support for the proposal. When Supervisors Chairman H.G. Vaughn, of the Ridgeway District, asked for a show of hands to see who supported the proposal, the majority of the about 50 people in the Henry County Administration Building's board meeting room raised their hands.

"We feel this is a reasonable and logical request that has the backing of a majority of local businesses," Edelen said.

Young also argued for the board to ask for a changed route, stressing the importance of I-73 to Blue Ridge's plans to potentially build indoor fish and shrimp farms in the 1,200-

acre expansion to the Patriot Centre. The board recently bought 1,200 acres to expand that industrial park.

“When I was a boy I lived in a wonderful place. We were the number one producer of wood furniture in the world when I was a boy,” he said, and the number two nylon producer and the sweatshirt capital of the world.

Now the only thing Martinsville can boast being number one in is Virginia unemployment, Young said.

But if Blue Ridge’s indoor shrimp and fish farming techniques succeed, Martinsville could again become number one in those industries, he said. It would employ hundreds, maybe thousands of people, he said, and if it succeeds it also would add as many as 10,000 trucks a year on roads that are not adequate under the current I-73 plan.

Young pointed at a map, noting how “lucky” Roanoke is that I-73 goes through the city and how it also comes close to Rocky Mount. But, he said, when you look at Martinsville it makes a large “loop” around it, almost like someone “didn’t want Martinsville to benefit.”

The proposed route being closer to the Patriot Centre and Martinsville would save money on fuel and employee driving time to the interstate, he said.

The proposal Edelen and Young presented also asks that part of the existing U.S. 58/220 Bypass be incorporated as part of I-73, which they argued would save years in construction time and hundreds of millions in construction costs.

Young said he was aware that people have argued that asking for a change to the route might delay the project, but he said they don’t know that for sure. And even if they are right, he said, “It’s not better to have a crummy interstate now as opposed to a good one later.”

John Parkinson, chairman of the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce and CEO of Drake Extrusion, however, said delaying the project was a real possibility if a change in the route is requested now that federal authorities have signed off on years of environmental studies and public input.

He said he felt the connector route was a “brilliant idea,” but a local issue. Changes to I-73, however, not only require VDOT support but must be approved by federal authorities.

In the time it takes to re-examine the project, others may get ahead of it in line and it may be abandoned altogether, he said.

“We can ill afford to have any delays on this,” he said.

Other speakers, however, supported the plan Edelen and Young presented. Faith Braziel of the Ridgeway District asked the board members how many times they have been on highways and seen signs noting that a city was five or more miles away. Instead of bothering to go that far people just “keep driving by,” she said.

“They’re not even going to stop for gas in our city,” she said, and she fears the community will be bypassed and die.

Hugh Gerlach, owner of Blue Ridge Gymnastics, said he has seen his business dwindle from 600 children a week four years ago and 13 employees to 335 children a week and seven employees now and feels an interstate closer to area businesses would help the economy.

“What I implore you to do is ... move I-73 closer,” he said.

Vaughn said he has been concerned that making changes to the I-73 project would delay it, as the board has been told by VDOT officials. However, Vaughn said, it also has heard a lot of “contradictory” things from others.

Vaughn said he spoke with 5th District U.S. Rep. Virgil Goode, R-Rocky Mount, about the issue. Goode told him that it was his opinion that the Federal Highway Administration would not have to review the whole project again and would simply have to study the part that would be changed, he said.

He also put Vaughn in contact with someone Vaughn said was a Federal Highway Administration official familiar with the project. Vaughn did not name the person.

When Vaughn asked that official if a change would delay the project, he said the official was “straightforward” with him and told him that a lawsuit has been filed against the project. Just the phase of the suit that official was dealing with now might take a year, he said. While the lawsuit is in progress no money can be spent on I-73, Vaughn said he was told.

Vaughn said after that conversation, he feels requesting a change is “not going to delay the project” any more than the ongoing approval processes, including the suit, will.

The board voted 5-0 to approve the resolution, which was prepared before the meeting. Iriswood District Supervisor Paula Burnette abstained, saying she thought the board should have taken more time to study it.

Other supervisors, however, such as Vaughn and Horsepasture District Supervisor Debra Buchanan, said all of the materials such as the federal “record of decision,” the approval document, have been public for months, and the board has discussed the issue several times.

Burnette also was concerned that there was no map of the proposed route, but Vaughn said that was intentional because it was not the board's desire to lock VDOT into a specific route. Flexibility is needed because of environmental and other issues, he said.

Lisa Price Hughes, VDOT resident engineer, told the board the resolution did not guarantee anything.

"This doesn't mean anything will change, but we certainly will be responsive to what you asked," she said.