

Forum is outlet to air transportation concerns

A critique of the state spending blueprint draws 70 people -- and lots of suggestions.

Jeff Sturgeon  
Roanoke Times  
May 23, 2007

Speakers outlined a plethora of transportation needs Tuesday, telling state transportation leaders gathered in Salem that the road system must get bigger and safer.

A few speakers plugged alternatives to single-occupant, gasoline-powered vehicles, flagging public transit, rail and greenways as important investments, but roads received top billing as 70 people turned out to critique the state's latest transportation spending blueprint, a document known as the draft Six-Year Improvement Program.

Five such hearings are scheduled across the state, after which leaders will ink the spending plan covering fiscal 2008, which begins in six weeks, and forecasting fiscal years 2009 through 2013.

"You've got some important decisions to make in the next few months," state Sen. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem, told assembled state transportation leaders, who included Secretary of Transportation Pierce Homer, commissioner David Ekern of the Virginia Department of Transportation, Director of Rail Transportation Kevin Page and members Jim Bowie, James Keen and Dana Martin of the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

Echoing a theme of several speakers, Skip Ressel of the Martinsville area urged officials to make sure they build the proposed new Interstate 73 connecting Roanoke and North Carolina as soon as possible. But first, officials must change the route that's on paper so the road will go past the community's Patriot Centre industrial park, Ressel said.

"We desperately feel I-73 is needed, but we need to put it in the right spot," Ressel said.

The forum was not an opportunity for leaders to reply to comments. But when another speaker made the same point, Homer picked up his pen and wrote a note. Multiple speakers also supported the expansion of Interstate 81.

Cheryl Daniels of Roanoke County went to the microphone to promote public transportation, saying she often has to walk home from her retail job because the buses don't run late enough. "We desperately need more funding for public transportation in this area."

She said people would be amazed to learn how much workers without cars spend on cab rides home from their jobs.

Ben Tripp said greenways are another nonroad investment that will pay off. He asked for support for a previously announced goal to finish the Roanoke Valley's greenway system within five years.

"We all feel it's important to the overall quality of life in the Roanoke area," Tripp said.

Representatives of Alleghany County showed up to ask for a concrete safety barrier to better separate a heavily traveled frontage road leading to three schools from Interstate 64 between Clifton Forge and Covington. Right now there's a wire fence, hardly comforting to parents transporting their children to and from school.

Susan Hammond, a Lexington-based VDOT official, said in an interview outside the meeting that I-64 has undergone some safety improvements and more are planned. The barrier is part of a safety project held up till 2013 "due to funding constraints," Hammond said. "It certainly is a strong priority for us."

With all the talk of new roads and improved roads, David Foster of Salem stood up to remind the room that road transport depends on petroleum, which someday might become prohibitively expensive or even run out.

"I think some of these projects are going to be obsolete by the time they're finished," said Foster, who is associated with Rail Solution, a group that calls railroads "the safest, cleanest, most efficient and least costly carriers of freight and people."

The hearing was still under way as 9 p.m. approached.