

The I-73 corridor: Boondoggle in the making

B.E. Goehring- Feb 2, 2007

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Goehring lives in Hardy.

If anyone thinks that the Interstate 73 new terrain highway is too far into the future to be of concern, think again. The long-awaited Final Environmental Impact Statement has just been released, and the news is not good for Franklin County.

As the main corridor for this project, our county will be the primary conduit for traffic passing through from Clearbrook to the North Carolina line. Franklin County gives up 60 percent of the land for the project and gets precious little in return.

Look south from the 1,500-foot level of Crowell Gap, and on a clear day you can see all the way to Fork Mountain. The approved location corridor for I-73 will cut our county in half as it slices through some of the most beautiful farmland in the region. Some of these farms are of historic significance. But it doesn't matter; the road must go through.

Actually, the road does not have to go down this path. There is a better route, and many in the Virginia Department of Transportation know it. That is why the signs were placed along U.S. 220 showing that roadway as the intended I-73 corridor.

Now we find ourselves at the final crossroad in the decision-making process. The Federal Highway Administration soon will either approve or disapprove this project. I know, it's hard to imagine something so laden with "pork" could possibly pass muster. But don't be surprised. Here are some of the questions that our friends in Washington and Richmond should be asking:

n Seems like only yesterday that we gave you folks money for a western bypass around Martinsville. Why aren't you using those 12 miles of four-lane, limited-access highway along U.S. 220 in the I-73 solution?

n You say you want a beltway around Martinsville. Not sure you really need it, but if you do, why not connect the north end of U.S. 58, which you just completed, to U.S. 220 at the Henry/Franklin county line?

n Great Scot! Your proposal is actually bypassing the bypass. Where do you think money comes from?

We're broke! Come see us when we get the deficit reduced.

Such candor is not likely to occur. But we can hope that concern will be given to an \$8.4 trillion national debt that will most likely continue to increase unless we start making sensible spending decisions. We should also be aware that the 2001 cost of I-73 was \$1.4 billion. That estimate is no longer valid. The 2006 number has increased to a shocking \$3.9 billion. Where will that number be in year 2020, and who do you think will be saddled with the bill?

Aside from the dismal dollar forecasts, another reality that must be faced is the right of a property owner to his land. Early in 2006, 18 property owners in the Sontag area of Franklin County were able to stop construction of a county airport that had been planned for some 10 years. The group maintained that they would not give up their land since there was no compelling reason to do so. Surprisingly, the supervisors agreed, and that was the end of the airport.

Twenty times that number of property owners will be resisting the taking of their land for an enormously expensive redundancy. It is fiscally irresponsible to build I-73 as a new terrain highway when an upgrade of U.S. 220 could be built at a fraction of the projected cost. Additionally, with only a few bypasses around congested areas, traffic can continue to flow on U.S. 220 uninterrupted during construction.

We have the ability to stop the Southwest Virginia version of pork-barrel spending. This is not to say that I-73 should not be built; it most certainly should be built. All five of the other participating states have made substantial commitments to this interstate, and Virginia should not be an impediment. These states are making their goals by using the existing highways wherever possible, and so should we. Bring U.S. 220 up to acceptable standards and we will be solving our problems now, rather than gambling on an uncertain future.