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King Coal Highway supporters seek fed funding for progress

By CHARLES OWENS

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BLUEFIELD, W.Va. — Supporters of the King Coal Highway in Mercer County traveled to Washington Tuesday where they requested an additional \$33.5 million in federal funds needed to extend the four-lane corridor toward Stoney Ridge and the Mercer County Airport.

The National Interstate 73/74 Corridor Association's meeting in Washington continues Wednesday as Mercer County officials meet with U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., and U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va. The group met Tuesday with U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., who called for a renewed investment in southern West Virginia's transportation infrastructure, including the King Coal Highway and the Coalfields Expressway.

"The I-73/74 corridor is just one of many important transportation projects that will help to create good jobs, improve our standards of living, and bring new businesses to southern West Virginia," Rahall said. "For these reasons, an investment in our roads is truly an investment in our future."

Several Mercer County officials made the trip to Washington, including Christine West Coburn, of the King Coal Highway Authority Board; Jim Bailey, of the Bluefield City Board of Directors; Marc Meachum, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce; and Mike Mitchem, executive director of the King Coal Highway Authority. The group was joined by Bill Wood, assistant division director of planning, programming and administration with the West Virginia Department of Transportation in Charleston.

Coburn said she was encouraged by the attendance at Tuesday's meeting, and the support of Rahall, Byrd and Rockefeller.

Mitchem said the King Coal Highway Authority is seeking \$16 million to extend the King Coal Highway in Bluefield another 1 1/4 miles toward Stoney Ridge and the Mercer County Airport. Mitchem said another \$17.5 million is needed to construct the two remaining bridges necessary to reach Route 123 and the airport.

"Right now — day one has been excellent," Mitchem said. "Everyone seems excited about the road."

Mitchem said the delegation is also seeking \$57 million to finish the Kenova to Sharps Branch section of the King Coal Highway in Wayne County. The \$57 million request

would allow for the construction of another 5.15 miles of the four-lane corridor in Wayne County.

Mitchem said letters of support for the King Coal and Tolsia highways from Sen. Truman Chafin, D-Mingo, the Bluefield City Board, the Princeton City Council and the Mercer County Commission were presented to Rahall, and will be presented Wednesday to Byrd and Rockefeller.

The new \$16.3 million King Coal bridge project now under construction in Bluefield will take the interstate corridor to the edge of Stoney Ridge. However, the remaining \$33.5 million is necessary to create a usable segment of the roadway from the K.A. Ammar Interchange in Bluefield to Route 123 and the airport.

Rahall said work toward the 2009 reauthorization of the Federal Aid Highway Program is already underway.

“You are prepared, and I believe that the shift in power of the Congress has provided you with a timely opportunity,” Rahall said. “Now is the time to make your own luck. Reach out to your legislators, as you do so well, and sing the praises of a new path forward.”

When completed, the King Coal Highway will travel 95 miles through Mingo, Wayne, Wyoming, McDowell and Mercer counties with the Tolsia segment from Williamson to Huntington extending another 55 miles. It will interchange with the Coalfields Expressway in Welch near the Indian Ridge Industrial Park and the site of the new federal prison. The King Coal and Tolsia Highways represent the West Virginia corridors of Interstate 73/74.

Charles Owens writes for the Bluefield (W.Va.) Daily Telegraph