

King Coal progress — Highway funds must stay in Mercer

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“Under budget” are two words infrequently heard to describe government projects. But when such a situation occurs, the region originally earmarked for the funding should benefit from the surplus.

Such is the case with a current construction project on the King Coal Highway in Mercer County.

Twenty million dollars in federal funds were initially allocated to build two twin bridges in Bluefield as part of the ongoing highway construction project. But the bid for the bridges accepted by the West Virginia Department of Transportation was for \$16,311,900 — \$3.7 million less than the original allocation.

Now, local officials are lobbying to make sure this extra money stays in Mercer County — and rightfully so.

The Mercer County Commission, Princeton City Council, Bluefield City Board and Development Authority of Mercer County have all passed resolutions requesting this funding be used to extend construction of the King Coal Highway in Bluefield toward Stoney Ridge.

At the heart of the request is a need to have the local section of the Interstate 73/74 corridor expanded toward Route 123, which would bring it near the Mercer County Airport and proposed multi-million dollar equestrian center site.

“The equestrian park project is about an \$18 million project, and we definitely need as quickly as possible for the roadway to reach the site,” Development Authority Director Janet Bailey told the Daily Telegraph earlier this week.

We agree with the assessment by Bailey and other officials in Mercer County for the rapid need of a usable section of the King Coal Highway to assist local development projects.

While funding problems have played a role in the past for the construction of the highway in bits and pieces, that should no longer be an issue with the \$3.7 million from the bridge project in play.

Mercer County officials are not being greedy by requesting money allocated for transportation development within the area to stay here. They are simply being smart, and asking for a fair shake.

The Princeton City Council resolution in support of the highway funding reads, in part, “The city council believes this project will assist continued growth for Mercer County and help with implementation of an \$18 million equestrian park project. Whereas the city council believes the I-73/74 King Coal Highway project, when completed, will provide a gateway across western and southern West Virginia to further economic development endeavors and job creation.”

This passage underscores the vital need for progress of the highway project for the benefit of all those who reside in Mercer County, as well as surrounding regions.

We are encouraged by the united show of support throughout the county for the King Coal Highway, the equestrian park and other development in the area.

It is now in the state’s hands to do what is fair — and right — by officially allocating the surplus \$3.7 million for additional I-73/74 construction toward Stoney Ridge in Mercer County — even if it is only a small stretch of the roadway.

And in light of our economic development opportunities on the horizon, this commitment must be made sooner rather than later.