

Lester: I-73 option good but costly

'I personally just want it built. I don't care where it goes.'
George Lester

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The Virginia Department of Transportation studied an alternate route for the proposed Interstate 73 but determined it would be too expensive, according to George Lester, chairman of the JobLink, a pro-I-73 group.

"I personally prefer the route that Max (Kendall) is proposing," Lester said. "I tried to prevail them to go that way too."

The route proposed by Kendall, an Axton businessman, would move the interstate closer to the city of Martinsville. It would have more interchanges, access to existing water and sewer lines, closer proximity to the Patriot Centre industrial park and use part of the existing U.S. 58 bypass, he has said.

Kendall also has said his plan would cut \$150 million from the project.

However, Lester said experts who studied the route determined it would be "cost prohibitive," mainly because of environmental problems such as wetlands impacts.

The community has to trust the experts, he said. "The most cost effective way was the one they settled on."

That route is further east than Kendall's route, extending near Laurel Park before heading south into North Carolina.

Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce President Kim Adkins said Kendall's route was among the ones looked at early on and tests were done on it. But they were not as extensive as those done in the past six years on the state-approved route, she said.

"People are taking him at his word" that it will save millions and have other benefits, Adkins said.

Lester, who is president of the Lester Group, also said questions about how much he may benefit from selling property if the finalized route is built are unfounded.

"I had more property in the route that he's (Kendall) proposing," Lester said.

Kendall has said has said the chamber has not listened to his concerns about the route.

Adkins said Kendall asked to speak to the chamber board about six months ago, before he had publicly unveiled his plans. The chamber believed a record of decision on the interstate was coming soon, and it believed the best course was for Kendall to go public with his plans to Martinsville City Council and the Henry County Board of Supervisors first.

“He was trying to use the chamber to get it out publicly and get us to support” it, Adkins said, adding that the chamber leadership felt that was not appropriate. That leadership included its eight-member executive committee, of which Lester is a part.

Now, Kendall is welcome to present his plan to the chamber, Adkins said.

“It’s a different set of circumstances. He’s already gone before council and the supervisors. He’s not using the chamber as a platform to advocate the new corridor and get us to support it,” she said.

Lester, a former chamber president, said when Kendall approached the organization with his plan, he was told that at this point, changing the route could endanger the project.

“It could become a threat to I-73 being built,” Lester said. “I personally just want it built. I don’t care where it goes.”

Adkins said the chamber is on record supporting the current corridor, as are other public bodies, including Martinsville City Council and the Henry County Board of Supervisors.

“The corridor has been finalized” by the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB), said Salem District Virginia Department of Transportation spokesman Chuck Lionberger.

“Should the CTB decide to do so, they can if they wish to change the routing,” he said, but that would require at least some environmental studies to be done again and “certainly delay the project.”

Kendall also said the last week that he disagreed with the chamber’s plan to spend \$42,500 from the Virginia Tobacco Commission and \$42,500 from The Harvest Foundation for an economic development study of the impact of the proposed I-73 corridor.

According to a study proposal, the analysis will focus on potential increases in employment, output of local companies, and state and local taxes that could result from I-73. It also will include traffic and construction cost estimates.

Kendall said the study is not needed because the route could change, if his is approved, and it will spend local money on a study that will include Franklin and Roanoke counties.

Adkins said she feels the study is appropriate and will be a good exhibit to help convince lawmakers of the benefits of funding the largely unfunded \$4 billion-plus project, which will run from Myrtle Beach, S.C., to Detroit, Mich.

Lester said it is unfortunate that attempts are being made to “make this thing personal.”

“We don’t need division, we need to speak with one voice,” he said. “As a community we need to unite and push for I-73 and get it built.”