

REMARKS

**George W. Lester, II, Chairman
JobLink**

**Virginia Department
of Transportation**

Public Hearing

**Salem Civic Center
October 24, 2007**

VDOT Public Hearing
October 24, 2007

Good evening, Gentlemen. Mr. Martin (Board Member), Commissioner David Ekern, Mr. Page (Multimodal Transportation Planning Office), Secretary Homer, and Mr. Richard Caywood (District Administrator - Salem). I'm George Lester of Martinsville, Chairman of JobLink – a committee of citizens that has worked for 15 years to bring Interstate 73 to this area to connect the Roanoke Valley with the Piedmont Triad.

I begin tonight with a salute to the staff of V-DOT. For more than a decade, V-DOT has worked on the location and design study and environmental impact statement for I-73, from the Roanoke Valley to the North Carolina-Virginia state line.

From the beginning, the staff understood the importance of the project and was meticulous in developing it. The emphasis on preserving our cultural and natural resources, on making decisions that have the minimum impact on existing homes and businesses, and on outreach to bring greater public involvement in the process were extremely impressive.

Nothing was left to chance. The "I"s were dotted and the "T"s were crossed. Evidence of the outstanding product is the acceptance of the report by the Federal Highway Administration and the resulting Record of Decision issued for the project. This is a document that will stand the test of time. Congratulations on a job well done.

(Glance to Richard Caywood)

Since the Record of Decision has been issued, it is time to move on to the next stage of work on I-73 – final engineering and land acquisition. There is more than 13-million dollars set aside to begin this work.

My request tonight is that you begin this work at the North Carolina-Virginia border. We recognize that I-73 is a long-term project. It's important to focus on one segment that has two connecting points. JobLink asks you to consider the 8-mile segment from the state line to US 58 near Laurel Park. Linking US 220 and 58 will eliminate the heavy congestion in the Ridgeway area while improving access to eastern Henry County and the Danville area.

For those of you from other parts of the State, I must remind you that we continue to struggle in Martinsville and Henry County. Earlier this month, Ridgeway Furniture announced it would close, ending an 81-year history of producing the famous grandfather clocks in Henry County. Then, we learned that Stanley Furniture will eliminate 250 jobs, both hourly and salaried. Earlier, Hooker Furniture and Bassett Furniture reduced their workforces and announced plant closings. This continues a sad story of job losses that now total approximately 12-thousand over the past 20 years. That's a lot of jobs for a small community, and it has resulted in a consistent loss of population as well.

We have nearly lost both the furniture and textile jobs that made Martinsville and Henry County the manufacturing capital of Virginia. Now, we must reinvent ourselves.

(pause)

We are doing something to reverse the situation. The City and the County are working together to attract new jobs.

We are investing private funds wisely, but we must have I-73 to open the highway of opportunity.

Our community's future rests on young people. Those who grew up here will not come back, and we will have no chance of attracting young people from outside the region if we do not have good paying jobs to offer them.

Interstate 73 is an economic pipeline for a brighter future.

On behalf of JobLink and the entire region from Roanoke to

Martinsville, I ask that you place I-73 at the highest

priority in the Commonwealth's transportation planning.

Our community's future is at stake.

Thank you.