

On the road for funding

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By CHARLES OWENS
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WASHINGTON — Mercer County officials asked the state's congressional leaders Thursday for an additional \$75 million needed to construct another 3.3 miles of the King Coal Highway near Bluefield.

The delegation, which met Thursday afternoon with U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., and U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., requested \$75 million to extend the King Coal Highway 3.3 miles from Route 123 to Route 20 and the site of the proposed multi-purpose equestrian park project, King Coal Highway Executive Director Mike Mitchem said.

"I am optimistic," Karen Dissibio, a member of the Mercer County Commission, said. "I think we will have a chance to receive funding, but it is going to be over a period of time that we receive funding because it is a large amount of money, and I don't think they can appropriate it all at one time."

Dissibio said the advancement of the four-lane corridor in Mercer County will help with the planned equestrian park, and other potential economic development projects that could be developed adjacent to the highway and equestrian park.

"I think they realize it is such a valuable project, and an income producing project," Dissibio said. "It (the highway) will make it (the equestrian park) develop so much quicker, and will be a key component of the overall picture of developing the equestrian center."

Christine West, a member of the local King Coal Highway I-73/74 Authority board, said officials left Thursday's meeting feeling optimistic.

"We are extremely appreciative of the reception we had from Sen. Byrd, and Congressman Rahall," West said. "We always have their complete cooperation under very difficult circumstances. We understand they will do everything they can do for us with funding. I know if at all possible they will help us."

The group also requested \$100 million in federal funds to extend the King Coal Highway in Mingo County to Gilbert Creek and Johnny Cake Mountain, which would bring the four-lane corridor to the border of McDowell County.

Mitchem said the \$100 million would be used for two projects in Mingo County, including the Gilbert Creek to Johnny Cake Mountain section and the Mary Taylor Mountain to Buffalo Mountain section. Mitchem said the two connections, and a

proposed section to be development through a public-private partnership agreement, would provide a link to U.S. Route 52 near Iaeger in McDowell County.

Mitchem said construction on the I-73/74 corridor could extend into McDowell County sooner than expected if a similar public-private partnership agreement can be reached with local coal companies.

“I have a meeting Monday with a coal company representative,” Mitchem said. “I can’t say his name right now, but he is interested in possibly doing a section from Johnny Cake Mountain to Sandy Huff in McDowell County.”

Mitchem said Rahall and the staff of Byrd and Rockefeller were very receptive to the funding request from the Mercer, Mingo and Wayne county delegations that traveled to Washington. The Wayne County delegation also requested \$100 million to build a 5.7 mile section of the Tolsia Highway from Kenova to Sharps Branch.

Construction is currently ongoing on the new \$16.3 million King Coal Highway bridge project in Bluefield. When completed, the twin bridges will extend about 160 feet above Route 19 taking the King Coal Highway from the K.A. Ammar Interchange in Bluefield toward Stoney Ridge. The construction is currently ahead of schedule.

The local King Coal Highway corridor of I-73/74 will extend about 95 miles in the future through Mingo, Wayne, Wyoming, McDowell and Mercer counties with the Tolsia segment from Williamson to Huntington extending another 55 miles. The King Coal and Tolsia Highways represent the West Virginia corridors of Interstate 73/74.

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