

Study cites Franklin benefits from I-73 corridor

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By Laurie Edwards
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An independent analysis project suggests the proposed Interstate-73 corridor, which passes through Roanoke and around Rocky Mount and Martinsville, would have a large economic impact on Franklin County.

"The economic benefits outweigh the costs by a ratio of 2 to 1," said Chris Chmura, president of Chmura Economics & Analytics. "The road will pay for itself in less than 10 years."

The I-73 corridor, which has received approval from the Federal Highway Administration, would run parallel to U.S. 220.

She presented the study at The Franklin Center in Rocky Mount on Tuesday to about three dozen county residents, and later to a group in Roanoke.

According to the study, the construction of the I-73 Virginia corridor would impact the local economy through population growth, employment growth, increased tourism and taxes.

Chmura said the population growth was lower in the proposed I-73 corridor than the Virginia average from 1970 to 2000. Annual Virginia population growth was 1.4 percent, with corridor population growing only 0.5 percent. In Franklin County, however, the growth was 1.9 percent.

Additionally, the annual employment growth from 1995 to 2005 in Virginia was 1.9 percent, but along the corridor, it was 0.0 percent. In Franklin County, the employment growth surpassed the state, with 2.6 percent.

"Much of the decline in this area has been continued contraction in manufacturing," said Chmura. "While we have lost manufacturing, we have not gained high-tech employment jobs."

According to the study, about 5,300 people would be employed each year, from 2012 to 2020 during the construction phase, either through the construction firms or as a result of increased need to service the workers.

"Businesses will buy things from suppliers in the area and employees will spend money in the area," said Chmura. "It's a multiplier impact."

Upon its completion, she said I-73 would attract businesses near interchanges, creating new jobs and bringing property and income taxes to the area. The study estimates that four hotels, five gas stations, three fast-food restaurants and two full-service restaurants would be established along the corridor in Franklin County by 2020, with an estimated 234 employees.

However, the study reads that Franklin County may need to invest in water and sewer lines to rural interchanges to attract businesses.

Tourism, said Chmura, would also increase with the completion of the I-73 corridor as it becomes easier for people to visit the region.

"I-73 will also improve access to Smith Mountain Lake, which may fuel population growth," reads the study. "I-73 will provide an almost direct link between Smith Mountain Lake and major metropolitan areas in the northeast."

Through employment, population growth and tourism, Chmura said the county will reap benefits from property and income taxes.

The overall economic impact along the Virginia I-73 corridor from tax and employment compensation is estimated at \$490.6 million during the construction phase and \$571.4 million by 2025.

To read the full report, visit www.franklincounty.org.

LAURIE EDWARDS | Laker Weekly 721.4675 (ext. 406)