

The region badly needs I-73; let the state know

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Lester, of Martinsville, is the vice chairman of the National I-73/74 Corridor Association and chairman of JobLink, an organization of community leaders in the Piedmont of Virginia and North Carolina that has promoted I-73 for 15 years.

The recent independent analysis by Chmura Economics & Analytics shows that Interstate 73 will have an incredibly positive impact on communities in the corridor from the Virginia/North Carolina border to the Roanoke Valley.

The Chmura analysis concludes that the economic benefits of building I-73 outweigh the costs by a 2-to-1 ratio -- and that the road, if built in the near future, would pay for itself in fewer than 10 years.

This report was produced by a nationally respected economic research firm. It provides credible hope for Martinsville and Henry County. We suffer with the highest unemployment rate in Virginia, standing at more than 10 percent.

The city of Roanoke lost 5,000 jobs in the decade ending 2005. The report brings great news about how we can turn around those sad statistics.

According to Chmura's study, the economic benefits of I-73 total \$8 billion. As many as 5,300 new jobs will be created by construction per year over an eight-year period, and after completion, I-73 will have created nearly 2,500 new jobs in our region.

What stands out to me is what the study offers in the way of long-term benefits -- the potential for attracting new businesses that will spark new growth in the Roanoke metro area and re-establish the economic vitality of the Martinsville area.

I-73 would allow our region to more effectively tout its competitive advantages, increasing our region's marketability. All too often, more prominent regions of the commonwealth, particularly Northern Virginia, and localities in neighboring states, such as Raleigh-Durham and Charlotte, have been able to use their vast resources to lure innovative businesses and younger workers to their back yards.

By making it safer and more efficient for companies to get their goods and products to market and making it easier for visitors to explore our many outdoor amenities, I-73

would help us diversify our economic base, attract and retain new workers, and ultimately strengthen our communities.

In addition to tangible economic benefits, the construction of I-73 would improve safety along the corridor between Roanoke and the North Carolina border. I understand that the majority of U.S. 220 also needs to be improved. In fact, some of the federal dollars for I-73 have been used to help with the more dangerous curves and crossovers.

However, building I-73 would take most of the through-traffic and commuters onto an interstate and allow local traffic to use 220. This is especially important for neighborhood school buses.

The Chmura report gives us all the information we need to move forward. One year ago, I-73 received final approval by the federal government, meaning Virginia can go ahead with construction.

It's time to build, and there is funding available in the Commonwealth Transportation Board's Six-Year Improvement Program. In fact, the latest version of the Six-Year Program shows construction of a section near Martinsville beginning in 2011.

We, as a region, must ask the Commonwealth Transportation Board not to do anything to delay that construction date. The economy of our region badly needs a boost, and construction will give us a jumpstart. It makes good sense to start building a section at the southern end of the corridor where the I-73 route comes into Virginia from North Carolina.

I publicly have expressed my appreciation to the Commonwealth Transportation Board for putting the 2011 construction date on a portion of I-73 near Martinsville. I hope you will join me in thanking them, because we need I-73 sooner rather than later.

The transportation board is taking input on its draft Six-Year Program through June 1. Please send a brief note expressing your support for building I-73 in 2011 to Commonwealth Transportation Board, Programming Director, 1401 E. Broad St., Richmond, VA 23233. Or you may write to SixYearProgram@VDOT.Virginia.gov.