

VDOT official: I-73 change impact tied to funding

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Changing the route of Interstate 73 could take two to three years, based on the Virginia Department of Transportation's (VDOT) experience with other route changes, according to an agency official.

That would be important if funds for the project were available now, said Richard Caywood, Salem District administrator for VDOT.

But "if funding is not available to move forward, the impact of looking at the corridor is less," he said.

There is \$12.6 million designated for I-73 now, Caywood said. The entire Virginia corridor is estimated to cost \$4 billion, he added.

However, H.G. Vaughn, chairman of the Henry County Board of Supervisors, said he has been told that no money can be spent on I-73 while a lawsuit is pending against it.

On Tuesday, the board of supervisors voted to ask the Commonwealth Transportation Board and VDOT to consider moving the I-73 route to better serve the Patriot Centre at Beaver Creek and Martinsville industrial parks and Martinsville Speedway. The supervisors also asked the state to incorporate a proposed Patriot Centre connector road into I-73.

It did that at the urging of a group of Henry County businessmen and after Vaughn said he was assured by engineers close to the project that the request would not delay it beyond the delay already caused by the suit filed against the project by a Franklin County environmental group.

Dana Martin of Roanoke, who represents Henry County and Martinsville on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, agreed with that in a Thursday interview. "That lawsuit is probably going to cause much greater delay than this resolution will cause," he said.

In addition, Vaughn said, the new route, which uses some of the existing U.S. 58/220 Bypass, could save time by eliminating the need for some environmental impact studies because they already had been done for the bypass.

Caywood said that is not necessarily true.

“Even though it’s on an existing road, there are still things we have to look at,” he said. “There is no free pass on the process in as far as having to do the analysis work” on such things as wetlands and residents to be displaced.

There have been two previous changes to the I-73 corridor — one in Roanoke after part of that city received a historic designation and one in Henry County when the route was moved from west of Martinsville to east of the city. In both cases, he said, the new routes were among the alternatives originally presented to the public.

But “part of the route the Henry County board wants to look at (now) has not been presented to the public” and may need to be studied, Caywood said. “Those are factors we would look at so the CTB would be informed of what we would be facing.”

The change in the Roanoke corridor took three years to complete, he said. Work on the entire I-73 corridor, which would stretch 74 miles, began in 1997, and the federal record of decision was not issued until March, he added.

“The process is designed to be inclusive but not necessarily fast,” he said.

Vaughn said he also was concerned about a possible delay in I-73 construction when Axton businessman Max Kendall spoke to the board about changing the route months ago.

The board also had been warned by Joblink — a group formed to push I-73 in Virginia — that any change sought during the record of decision process might jeopardize or delay the project, he said, adding that was confirmed last week by state and federal engineers.

Kendall’s route made sense, being closer to Martinsville and using some of the existing bypass, Vaughn said, but he would not jeopardize the project.

“The significant event” was when the board of supervisors decided to buy 1,206 acres to expand the Patriot Centre industrial park, he said. About the same time, he learned some Patriot Centre businessmen were circulating petitions asking the board to look at the Kendall route to improve access to their businesses.

“Things began to come together,” Vaughn said, especially when he saw truck traffic on Kings Mountain Road and realized the impact of doubling the Patriot Centre would have on local roads.

That was when he came up with the idea of building a connector road from the U.S. 220/58 bypass in Laurel Park to the industrial park. The business community backed that idea and said it should be part of I-73, he said.

By doing that, Vaughn said, the connector could be built with federal funds, reducing the chance that it would draw state funds away from road projects such as U.S. 58.

The original I-73 route was about two miles from Nautica Way in the Patriot Centre and three miles to the speedway, with no interchange there, Vaughn said. An engineer told him that depending on the design of the interchange, federal money might pay for 100 to 200 feet of roads to connect the track and the industrial park to the interstate. The rest would come from state or grant funds that might be available, Vaughn said he was told.

“The new design cuts down on connector roads. That is less we would have to come up with in grants” and other funds, he said.

Vaughn said he also talked to Martinsville Speedway President Clay Campbell and learned Campbell prefers the track to be near an interstate, even if it jeopardizes the bypass interchange now near the speedway.

Also, a federal engineer told him that “from his observations,” only minor improvements would be needed to bring the bypass up to interstate standards. Vaughn said he did not know what those improvements would be.

Caywood said if CTB member Martin requests it, VDOT will work with him and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) — which also must approve the interstate route — to decide what information the CTB will need to consider moving the route.

“As an agency, we work with the FHWA on the impact to the corridor selected and how much we have to revisit,” he said. “... There is really no debate between VDOT and Henry County. I don’t know the final outcome. My role is to carry out policies of the board and enact their decision.”