

## **We need a usable segment of the King Coal Highway corridor in Bluefield**

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After seemingly hitting every pothole there was to hit between Bluefield and Princeton this past weekend, I was reminded of two things.

First, it's time for the Division of Highways to start patching these monster pot holes. Secondly, we could definitely use a few more new roads in the region. The highway department can't begin patching all of those nasty potholes until the asphalt plants reopen, which should be very soon. However, we can continue building new roads now.

I've overheard a few people say in recent months that if we had only a small fraction of the millions upon millions of dollars that are being expended in Iraq to build new roads and bridges, we could have probably had the Coalfields Expressway and the King Coal Highway completed by now in southern West Virginia. Their argument is probably correct. However, the reality of the situation is that it will still be years — if not decades — before these modern four-lane corridors are completed in the region.

That's not to say we aren't seeing some progress at the moment. A near 10-mile segment of the King Coal Highway is nearing completion in Mingo County. Plus, contractors are making lots of visible progress near Stoney Ridge and Route 19 on the new \$16.3 million King Coal Highway twin bridge project in Bluefield.

If you have driven past the construction site lately, and are wondering how all this will work — it's relatively simple. The new road and bridge begins where the big "road closed" sign has been sitting for the past several years at the K.A. Ammar Interchange.

When completed, traffic traveling along the interchange will continue on toward Stoney Ridge by crossing the twin bridges that will extend about 160 feet above Route 19. The problem is the bridge just leads to a giant mountain. Thus the road and the bridge will remain unusable for now. We won't have a usable segment of the local King Coal Highway corridor until the road reaches Route 123, the Mercer County Airport and the site of the multi-purpose equestrian park project.

Unless we see a significant federal funding boost soon — including money specifically earmarked for Mercer County — it looks like we won't have a usable segment of the King Coal Highway anytime soon. That's why local supporters of the highway, and the national Interstate 73/74 corridor association, will be returning to Washington next month to meet with members of West Virginia's congressional delegation.

King Coal Highway Executive Director Mike Mitchem told me last week that local highway supporters will be meeting with U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., U.S. Rep.

Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., and U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., during the April 9-10 trip.

Mitchem said the group will be specifically seeking funding for the Mercer County segment of the highway in hopes of getting the new four lane corridor closer to the Mercer County Airport, the multi-purpose equestrian park and ultimately McDowell County.

When completed one day in the hopefully not too distant future, the entire King Coal Highway corridor will extend about 95 miles through Mingo, Wayne, Wyoming, McDowell and Mercer counties with the Tolsia segment from Williamson to Huntington extending another 55 miles.

The King Coal Highway will interchange with the Coalfields Expressway in Welch near the Indian Ridge Industrial Park, and the site of the new federal prison.

Together, the King Coal and Tolsia Highways represent the West Virginia corridors of Interstate 73/74. And yes, in case you were wondering, the future I-73/74 corridor will reduce the travel time from Bluefield to Myrtle Beach, S.C.

However, we are still miles and years away from realizing a 95-mile segment of the King Coal Highway corridor, and a shorter ride to Myrtle Beach. The best we can probably hope for at the moment is a usable segment of the King Coal Highway in Bluefield extending from the K.A. Ammar Interchange to the Mercer County Airport. This is a feasible and realistic goal. It will just take additional federal and state funding support to make it happen.

A bridge to nowhere won't do us much good. We need a usable segment of the King Coal Highway corridor in Bluefield. It's a goal worth fighting for and an objective we should be able to reach with help from our elected lawmakers in Washington.

In the meantime, would the DOH please start patching some of these nasty potholes across the region. That's a problem that can be corrected now without the help of our lawmakers in Washington.

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