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COMMENTARY: We Need More Toll Roads, Not Fewer

By Craig Hammond

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National highway officials have been telling us for the last decade that the north and south interstate routes (such as I-77 and I-81) have dangerously more than doubled -- and in some areas have tripled -- in traffic volume.

New routes are needed to alleviate the congestion. The King Coal Highway which will carry the I-73/74 Corridor comes to mind.

However, it has now become very clear that neither Senator Robert C. Byrd , D-WV or 3rd District Congressman Nick J. Rahall, D-WV will give the King Coal Highway the immediate attention it deserves. Therefore our only hope is to make most of the unbuilt West Virginia portion of the corridor (from Bluefield to Huntington) a toll road.

Since federal law prohibits toll roads on existing highways and our congressional representatives are obsessed with the Coalfield Expressway (a silly route extending from Beckley to Welch and eventually to Grundy, Virginia -- a toll road is the only way this much needed road can be built in the next two generations. When our country desperately needs a new north/south route, our representatives are fixated --and even have a fetish -- with a road to Grundy, Virginia.

Yes, I'm calling for the expansion of the West Virginia Parkways, Economic Development, and Tourism Authority to include the King Coal Highway. You may hate me now, but you'll thank me later.

I don't like paying tolls any more than any one else but keep in mind that by all standards, the West Virginia Turnpike is the best stretch of four-lane highway in the state.

Bridges are inspected and maintained on a schedule far above the national average and the 'Pike is second to none when it comes to snow removal.

The West Virginia Turnpike provides close to \$2 million of gross salaries paid to Turnpike employees who live in, and support, communities throughout Mercer County.

This figure doesn't include many employees of the State Police, HMS (food service), PMI (gas stations) and Tamarack who also live in Mercer County.

Sixty million dollars are collected annually, which primarily go right back into the economy through wages, local contractors who perform capital improvements, material suppliers and other vendors.

Economic Development projects from the authority which have benefited Mercer County include the Pipestem Water Line, Town of Athens Water Line and a good portion of the Hatfield and McCoy Trail, all of which create either jobs and/or tourism and infrastructure improvements in southern West Virginia.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot, that the Authority had planned a \$17 million capital improvemnet project to be performed south of Ghent for next year. That's almost entirely in Mercer County. All construction aggregate, asphalt, and concrete will be produced by companies located in Mercer County, hauled by trucking companies whose drivers are from Mercer County, and placed on the job by construction crews who are from Mercer County.

As you can see, there's a lot of benefits to expanding the authority. If the King Coal Highway is ever going to be built it must be in the form of a toll road. Let's get our representatives to introduce legislation that will expand the West Virginia Parkways, Economic Development, and Tourism Authority, not eliminate it.

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Craig Hammond is a former mayor of Bluefield and is host of the hour long Radio Active every week day at 9:06am on WHIS 1440 AM and WTZE 1470 AM. Hammond does not know or is related to one soul who works for the WV Parkways, Economic Development, and Tourism Authority.
