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Yet another road block: Delays on King Coal work are ridiculous

Bluefield Daily Telegraph

Here we go again. We have been waiting and waiting — and waiting patiently — since last fall for the long-promised resumption of construction on the King Coal Highway in Bluefield. Why has the West Virginia Department of Transportation has been dragging its feet on this project that is so critical to the future of southern West Virginia?

When a delegation of King Coal Highway supporters traveled to Charleston last year in hopes of expediting the resumption of construction in Bluefield, they were promised the new \$20 million bridge for Bluefield would be advertised for construction by the year's end. That was 2006. It's now May of 2007. Still no dirt has been moved in Bluefield.

We learned Monday that bids on the project were finally opened after several delays. However, state officials are now reporting an "irregularity" in one of the bids received. As a result, all of the bids received now have to be thrown out, and the project has been deferred until June 12.

All of the bidders didn't receive an addendum that was supposed to be in the plans submitted, according to Brent Walker, assistant director of communications for the West Virginia Department of Transportation. As a result, Walker said the bids had to be thrown out, and the project will be re-let on June 12.

What happened?

How could such a mistake occur on a project so vital to the future of southern West Virginia? Must we once again explain to the WVDOT, Highway Commissioner Paul Mattox, and Gov. Joe Manchin just how vital the King Coal Highway is to the future of Mercer and McDowell counties — and all of southern West Virginia?

The work is critical for the proposed multi-purpose equestrian park.

It's critical for the federal prison and the Indian Ridge Industrial Park in McDowell County.

It's critical to Bluefield, and it's critical to Princeton.

We need and must have a new and modern interstate highway system. King Coal — combined with the Tolsia Highways — represents the West Virginia corridors of Interstate 73/74. King Coal will travel 96 miles through Mingo, Wayne, Wyoming, McDowell and Mercer connecting with the Tolsia segment from Williamson to Huntington and extending another 55 miles.

For his part, Manchin was unaware of the apparent bidding glitch when questioned about it Tuesday during a tour of the Indian Ridge Industrial Park in Welch. It is important to note that officials gathered at the ceremony were quick to emphasize the importance of the King Coal Highway and Coalfields Expressway interchange site proposed near the Indian Ridge Industrial Park and the new \$232 million federal prison project.

The governor did reiterate his support for the King Coal Highway project, and the desire of his administration to secure all matching state funds available for the project.

We will hold Manchin to his commitment. We don't know why the governor's office wasn't informed of the latest bidding shenanigan, but we now urge Manchin to take steps to order an immediate resumption of the project bids.

If we must wait until June 12 — we will reluctantly wait. We've already waited about five years for the resumption of construction in Bluefield. Waiting another month won't kill the project. However, we aren't happy about having to wait any longer. We think the governor can expedite the bidding process.

If federal and matching state dollars are available to build the bridge in Bluefield, we must build it now.

No more delays.

No more waiting.

No more confusion over the availability of state matching funds.

No more bidding irregularities.

It's time to start moving dirt once again in Bluefield.

The bridge work will begin where construction ended five years ago on the K.A. Ammar Interchange in Bluefield.

When completed, it will span Route 19 connecting with Stoney Ridge, bringing the four-lane corridor one step closer to Route 123 and the Mercer County Airport.

No more excuses.

It's time to get back to work in Bluefield.

Every additional day, week and month lost on this project is no longer acceptable.