



P R E S S * R E L E A S E

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Conservation Groups Applaud Right-Sizing of Massive Mountain Highway in NC, TN

Leaner alternatives will save money and the environment

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Asheville, NC – The Departments of Transportation in Tennessee and North Carolina are now studying, among other options, ways to complete the Corridor K project between Chattanooga and Asheville by improving existing roads instead of building stretches of new four-lane highway through mostly new terrain, a proposal which has drawn regionwide opposition.

Conservation groups in both states said Wednesday they are encouraged by news that the agencies are looking at developing two-lane routes mostly along existing roads, which, with necessary improvements, would meet the transportation needs of local communities. Previous proposals for completing the unfinished segments of Corridor K focused on cutting new highways through the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee and the Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina. Both DOTs are now considering two-lane alternatives with lighter environmental footprints at significantly reduced costs to federal and state taxpayers.

“A massive, four-lane highway through the mountains of this region is overkill, both in terms of the price tag and environmental harm. It’s great news the agencies are considering more reasonable alternatives,” said DJ Gerken with the Southern Environmental Law Center. In North Carolina, he said, the DOT’s own studies show that improvements to existing two-lane highways in the project area will exceed the needed traffic capacity for decades. “They can’t ignore an alternative that costs half as much and avoids paving through an environmental treasure. Federal law is clear on this.”

NCDOT, in its draft environmental study released in August 2008, refused to consider any alternative other than a new four-lane highway. The project would cost \$378 million and cut a 2,870-foot. tunnel under the Snowbird Mountains, requiring excavation of 3 million cubic yards of rock. Despite the

enormous cost and environmental damage, DOT documents confirm that for most hours of the day, the new road would make no difference in travel times.

Conservation groups and citizens protested, arguing that reasonable improvements to existing two-lane roads in the area would serve local traffic needs at less than half the cost and with far less impact on the pristine Stecoah and Cheoah Bald Areas of western North Carolina. The Army Corps of Engineers, which must issue permits for the remaining sections of Corridor K in both states, told NCDOT in October it must consider the alternative of upgrading and improving existing two-lane roads.

“We are extremely gratified that NC DOT will be giving full consideration to the alternative of upgrading and improving existing two-lane highways. A new four-lane highway through sensitive mountain habitat would have unacceptably destructive impacts to wildlife habitat and water quality. Upgrading existing highways has always made the most sense,” said Hugh Irwin with the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition.

“A four-lane highway would be massively degrading to the waters in this pristine area, as well as to the valuable natural and historic assets of the region which generate millions of dollars in annual recreational revenue to the mountain region, including scenic trails, trout streams, hunting habitat, campgrounds, recreational businesses and historic sites,” said Chris North with the North Carolina Wildlife Federation.

In Tennessee, the DOT is weighing alternatives for completing the section of Corridor K through the Ocoee River Gorge. In a recent report to a citizen’s advisory panel convened to help TDOT consider design options, the agency confirmed its intention to give full consideration to alternatives that improve existing two-lane highways. It outlined a range of possible two-lane and four-lane routes, including a corridor based on existing Highway 64, and estimated the two-lane options would cost as little as half the four-lane options. The most expensive option, construction of a new four-lane highway through the Cherokee forest north of the Highway 64, would cost as much as \$1.3 billion, whereas improvements to Highway 64 could be completed for as little as \$304 million.

“WaysSouth is pleased at this signal that agencies are beginning to recognize that the historic approach of building more and bigger highways is neither environmentally nor economically sustainable,” said Jim Grode, executive director of WaysSouth.

“The Sierra Club has long been advocating for reasonable and practical alternatives to road projects. We are gratified that the Corps of Engineers in North Carolina and now TDOT for the Ocoee segment of Corridor K have recognized that four-lane superhighways may not be appropriate for the southern Appalachian mountains,” said Axel Ringe with the Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club.

The Southern Environmental Law Center is a regional nonprofit using the power of the law to protect the health and environment of the Southeast (Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama). Founded in 1986, SELC’s team of 40 legal experts represent more than 100 partner

groups on issues of climate change and energy, air and water quality, forests, the coast and wetlands, transportation, and land use.

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