



## **Corridor K: We need reasonable improvements, not a 4-lane through our mountains**

Corridor K is a proposed new highway running from Stecoah, through Robbinsville, to Andrews. NCDOT is currently studying only Segments “B and C,” between Stecoah and Robbinsville. Consideration of Segment A, which would continue from Robbinsville to Andrews through the Snowbird Mountains and would complete a proposed rerouting of U.S. Highway 74 outside the Nantahala Gorge, has been postponed due to “funding and scheduling considerations.”

In 2008, NCDOT released a draft environmental study proposing a new 4-lane highway between Stecoah and Robbinsville. In this analysis, NCDOT did not consider any alternative with less than four lanes and refused to consider reasonable upgrades to existing highways to address transportation needs. However, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and NC Division of Water Quality subsequently required NCDOT to look at improving the existing roads. NCDOT recently issued a report analyzing and rejecting those improvements. NCDOT, however, has failed to justify its desire to build a new 4-lane highway:

### **NCDOT Improperly Dismissed the Option of Improving Existing Roads**

NCDOT’s deeply flawed report concluded that improving existing roads would not be a feasible alternative for two main reasons: (1) it would not permit them to relocate US 74 out of the Nantahala Gorge; and (2) crossing the Appalachian Trail at grade would have unacceptable impacts on the trail compared to crossing in a tunnel. Neither of these rationales justifies eliminating the improvements alternative:

- NCDOT is currently only considering Segments B and C, but building these segments will not allow Highway 74 to be rerouted out of the Nantahala Gorge, because it will not create a direct route all the way back to the four-lane highway west of Andrews. Only if Segment A is built can US 74 be rerouted. Yet NCDOT has not looked at the impacts and costs of the entire route including Segment A. If NCDOT wants to eliminate alternatives on the basis that they won’t allow US 74 to be rerouted, it must also consider the costs and impacts of Segment A. In fact, though, nothing about the existing roads would preclude upgrades to meet the reasonable transportation needs of the region.
- NCDOT also says improvements to existing roads would have unacceptable impacts on the Appalachian Trail. They say the preferred alternative would have no impact on the trail because it crosses under in a tunnel. But, it would run parallel to the trail, less than a quarter-mile away, for about two miles. Which is really a greater impact on the trail: slightly widening an existing crossing, or the noise and lights from two miles of a steep major highway within ¼ mile of the trail? In addition, the impacts of a crossing could be further mitigated by a trail overpass for far less than the new highway would cost.

## **NCDOT's Analysis is Selective and One-Sided**

- NCDOT's analysis has been selective and biased toward its predetermined goal of building a new 4-lane highway. Nowhere is this bias more glaring than when it partially justified its dismissal of improvements to the existing road on the option's "considerable impacts" to streams and the national forest, even though NCDOT's own numbers show that those impacts would be less than half of those of its preferred alternative.
- NCDOT's bias is also evident in its treatment of Segment A: It relies on the "benefits" that Segment A would provide (e.g., the ability to reroute US 74, economic development) when that helps its position, but it ignores the negative aspects of Segment A (e.g., exorbitant cost, severe environmental impacts) that detract from its position.
- These and other examples are part of a pattern by NCDOT of minimizing the difficulties of its preferred alternative (e.g., the extensive rock cuts it will require, the likelihood of encountering acidic rock in those cuts, the steep grades that will remain despite the alternative's circuitous route) but emphasizing the difficulties of improving existing roads.

## **NCDOT's Preferred Alternative Is Economically Disastrous**

- The costs of NCDOT's preferred alternative are prohibitive. Up to \$235 million is currently available from the Appalachian Regional Commission to construct designated Appalachian Development Highway System corridors in North Carolina, including Corridor K. By comparison, NCDOT has estimated that Segments B and C will cost \$383 million without accounting for potential environmental mitigation such as dealing with the acid bearing rock that is likely to be exposed. Assuming
  - (1) the state uses all ADHS funds for Corridor K and gives up on completing any other ADHS roads such as Corridor A;
  - (2) North Carolina continues to receive \$33 million in ADHS funds annually as it has in recent years and the state can come up with its required 20% match—generous assumptions in today's budgetary world—and
  - (3) no additional funds will be required for environmental mitigation—an assumption that is generous to the point of unreality (in fact, these mitigation costs would likely rival the actual construction costs); we can conclude:
    - NCDOT would have a little more than sufficient funds to begin construction of Segments B and C on its current timetable (right of way acquisition in 2014 and construction beginning in 2016). In short, only in a nearly-best-case scenario can NCDOT meet its schedule for Segments B and C. In actuality, the schedule probably is impossible.
    - If Segment A from Robbinsville to Andrews is also considered, as it must be to meet NCDOT's stated goals, the economic picture becomes much worse. Assuming the same per-mile costs projected for Segments B and C, which is likely to be a low

- estimate, costs to complete this highway will approach \$1 billion (in 2008 dollars) and the best-case scenario completion date would not be before 2028.
- NCDOT must estimate the environmental mitigation costs. No one would build a house without any idea how much the foundation costs; NCDOT's failure to do the equivalent analysis for this project is either grossly negligent or an indication that NCDOT has no intention of doing it right.
  - The benefits of a new road are minimal:
    - Recent studies generally show that any economic benefits from rural highways accrue to the major metropolitan areas they link, not the rural areas they pass through. Are we really willing to sacrifice the Stecoah and Sweetwater Valleys and the Snowbird Mountains, and turn Robbinsville into just another highway interchange strip, for the benefit of Asheville and Charlotte and Chattanooga?
    - A study of indirect and cumulative effects of Segments B and C of Corridor K (the ICE Report) was recently completed for NCDOT, and it confirms that the road will not bring prosperity to Graham County. The report stated: "Without the complete connection that section 'A' and the remainder of Corridor K affords, the development of commercial properties is likely to continue at a very slow pace, centered on the existing intersections (especially US 129) and the Town of Robbinsville." That is, whatever economic development the road will bring depends almost entirely on building the entire road—any segment will have little or no effect.
    - The ICE Report attempted to quantify economic benefits of Segments B and C, and found a one-time value added of \$30 million attributable to the construction project, and an additional annual benefit of \$4.56 million. If the assumed minimum price tag of \$383 million is correct, this translates to a payback period of over 75 years—a return on investment no rational investor would touch, and substantially longer than the projected life of the road. Even this paltry benefit may be overstated, because the report may have calculated its benefits incorrectly; the correct annual benefit may be less than half what the report states.
    - The ICE report noted that most growth would simply be diversion of growth from other areas rather than new economic growth.
    - The report also stated that "a significant increase in commercial development is not expected," that most development would be strip and sprawl development, and that "there is moderate potential for negative consequences of indirect and cumulative effects" as a result of the project. In other words, whatever growth occurs will not be high quality growth and could ultimately prove to do more harm than good.
    - The bottom line is this road won't pay for itself, much less create real economic development.

### **NCDOT's Preferred Alternative Would Have Unacceptable Environmental Impacts**

- Just on the 9.85 miles of Segments B and C of NCDOT's preferred alternative:
  - Over 3.5 miles of streams and 1.4 acres of wetlands would be affected.
  - Over 250 acres of high-quality forests and 85 acres of high-quality farmland would be destroyed.
  - There is the potential for significant acid rock impacts. Much of the area is underlain by "sulfidic" or acidic rock that, when exposed to weather, form sulfuric acid that drains into streams and wetlands. Although precise mapping hasn't been done, it is highly likely that the new road will encounter significant amounts of this rock. Although technologies have been developed to encapsulate and isolate acidic rock, they are expensive and have not been proven effective in the long term.
- Segment A, which would be necessary to meet NCDOT's stated goals, would run through the mainly roadless Snowbird Mountains, which are even more rugged, steep, and sensitive than the path of Segments B and C. It is safe to say that Segment A would have even greater environmental impacts than Segments B and C.

### **NCDOT's Preferred Alternative Would Have Unacceptable Visual Impacts**

- NCDOT's preferred alternative would require road cuts up to 160 feet high into the head of the Stecoah Valley, which would be visible from miles away, and much of the new road would be visible from the Appalachian Trail.

### **NCDOT's Preferred Alternative Would Have Unacceptable Impacts on the Stecoah Valley**

- The Stecoah Valley is an important and cohesive farming community. NCDOT's preferred alternative would split the heart of the valley and forever change its character visually, environmentally, and culturally.

### **NCDOT's Preferred Alternative Would Increase the Risk of Landslides**

- Like many areas in Western North Carolina, Graham County is subject to significant threats from landslides. NCDOT's preferred alternative, because it would expose more rock, would increase these threats.

### **NCDOT's Preferred Alternative Would Not Significantly Improve Medical Access**

- An often-stated justification for the new road is that residents of Graham County have limited access to medical facilities and must often be airlifted to hospitals. However, according to the travel time estimates prepared by NCDOT, Corridor K would do little or nothing to alleviate this: The time savings simply aren't enough to change the ability to transport patients by road in an emergency.