WaysSouth Voices

Responsible Transportation in Appalachia August - 2011

I-3 STUDY WRAPPING UP

The Congressionally mandated study of "the steps and estimated funding necessary to designate and construct a route for the 3rd Infantry Division Highway, extending from Savannah, Georgia, to Knoxville, Tennessee, by way of Augusta, Georgia," or the I-3 Study, is nearly complete. It looks more promising than ever that this ill-conceived project will not be built. Since the study began a year ago, WaysSouth's Executive Director Jim Grode has served as a member of the "Expert Working Group" monitoring and advising the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) as it conducts the study. At every step, we've worked to protect the Southern Appalachians, and taxpayers' pockets.

FHWA initially identified four general corridors for I-3 (see the map at http://www.wayssouth.org/campaigns/stop-i-3/resources/initial-routes/ and then analyzed the advantages and drawbacks of each. It concluded that three of the four corridors had "fatal flaws" in the form of environmental, geographic, political, or other obstacles.

The fourth corridor, Corridor A, roughly runs within Georgia through or near Savannah, Augusta, Athens, Dahlonega, Ellijay, and Chatsworth, before crossing the Tennessee line and joining I-75 near Cleveland on the way to Knoxville. FHWA identified this as the "least bad" of the options and therefore proceeded to the next step, estimating costs, for this option only.

At no time during the study did anyone identify a purpose and need for the highway

The costs to construct I-3 were estimated for four different design levels ranging from a full interstate to "context sensitive design," based on average per-mile costs for similar roads. Estimates ranged from $6.1 billion to $560 million. For comparison, the State of Georgia's entire transportation budget for the years 2011-2014 is $6.9 billion.

During the course of the study, FHWA opened up the lines for public input through email and a series of webinars, and WaysSouth spread the word. Thanks to the enthusiastic response of our supporters, over 95% of the comments FHWA received opposed construction of I-3.

The study has confirmed what we've said all along: I-3 is a boondoggle that does not enjoy public support or agency interest, and should not be constructed. At press time, the final report is undergoing departmental review and will be submitted to Congress in the near future. We will let you know when it's available, and in the meantime check http://www.wayssouth.org/ for updates.

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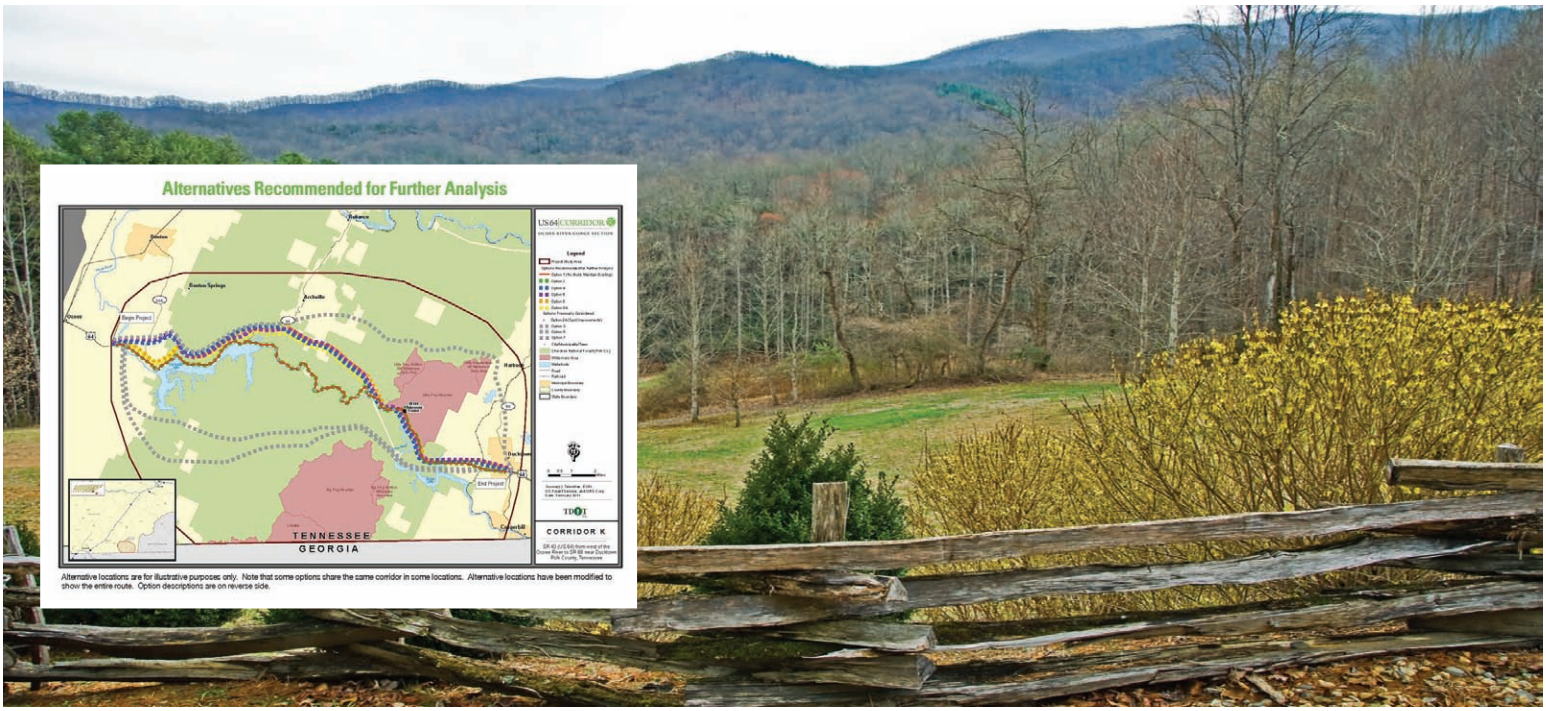


Lots of activities surrounding Corridor K proposals in both North Carolina and Tennessee have kept WaysSouth busy organizing comments, sponsoring meetings and attending hearings.

In Tennessee, TDOT held public meetings and a written comment period this spring. They announced plans to drop from consideration several of the early options, including the southern routes that pass through the Ocoee Bear Reserve and the "Kimsey Highway" route. Unfortunately, they are also dropping the economically and environmentally preferable option for spot improvements on the existing road.

TDOT also will only be looking at two-lane options. They are unclear about whether they will acquire enough right-of-way to keep a four-lane option for later upgrades. However, the two-lane options call for 12-foot travel lanes with 12 foot shoulders plus a ditch on each side for a footprint of over 50 feet. TDOT has provided no rationale or need for such an intrusive road.

WaysSouth organized comments protesting the elimination of the spot improvements alternative and setting out our vision of what a reasonable alternative would look like.

The project now enters the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) analysis and drafting phase. TDOT plans to release a draft EIS in Fall 2012. In preparation for this phase, WaysSouth held two open meetings to discuss strategies. We continue to work with citizens and partner groups to influence the process and ensure the best EIS.

UPDATE

Corridor K Coalition
A Better Way For Corridor K

UPDATE

In North Carolina, NCDOT also held a hearing and comment period this spring. WaysSouth organized comments in favor of improving existing roads instead of building the devastating new four-lane highway NCDOT supports.

NCDOT recently prepared a report analyzing improvements on existing roads, as required by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers . NCDOT concluded that the "improvements" alternative is not feasible. However, this assessment is deeply flawed and the Corps and other agencies have refused to accept its conclusions. Agencies with approval jurisdiction over the NC project are at an impasse on what the proper course is. A mediation process has been initiated and consequently the schedule for this segment of Corridor K is very uncertain.

A second NCDOT report, addressing "Indirect and Cumulative Effects" of the project, largely delves into economic issues and verifies that despite its backers' claims, Corridor K will have virtually no beneficial economic impact.

Thanks to everyone who participated in meetings and hearings put on both by the state DOTs and by WaysSouth, and to those who submitted comments on either segment. With your support, we will continue pressing for solutions that are right for the region's culture, environment, and economy.

WaysSouth and Sierra Club Team Up for Dahlonega Public Meeting

The Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club and WaysSouth teamed up to hold a public meeting about I-3 on May 25, at the United Community Bank in Dahlonega, GA. The I-3 Study's preferred route would extend through Dahlonega and the Ellijay GA area before stretching to Knoxville, TN. About 50 citizens from North Georgia attended the gathering.

"This and other alternative routes proposed by the Federal highway consultants all create major problems in Southern Appalachia," said Larry Winslett, Conservation Chair for the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club. Our special thanks go to Larry and the other volunteers for their efforts.

Help Wanted! To Meet Our Goals

WaysSouth has made a good start with our Strategic Plan, but we need volunteer help to carry us forward and make the plan work. Please look at the volunteer needs described below and let us know at info@wayssouth.org if you can help. Or, make additional suggestions that match your capabilities. You don't need to be an expert to help, just enthusiastic!

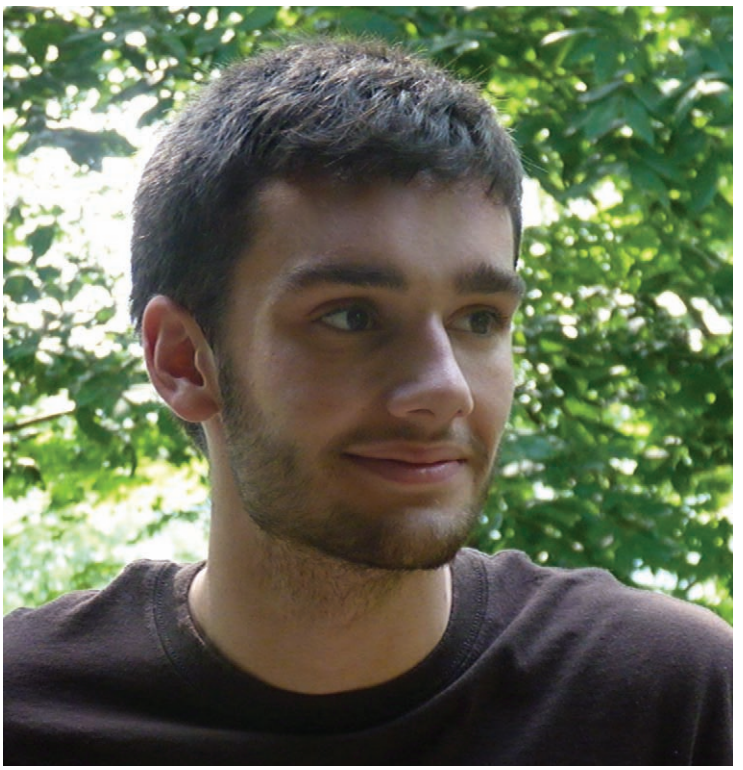
Volunteers are needed to:

- Review and critique drafts of the Model ground transportation system for the Southern Appalachians.
- Identify and compile ongoing state and regional planning processes -- and to participate in local planning.
- Gather existing transportation planning and policy documents from States where WaysSouth is active.
- Establish relationships with key local elected officials.
- Help identify critical documents that we can link to the WaysSouth website.
- Plan upcoming WaysSouth public information events in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee.

We are always looking for volunteers to help advocate on specific projects such as Corridor K and our Rail Task Force. Contact us if you are aware of specific projects that need work, or are interested in joining one of our mailing lists to become more involved in existing projects.

R.I.P. Celebrate Nails In I-3 Coffin

Plans are underway for a WaysSouth Celebration of progress in stopping I-3. Put Saturday October 8, 2011 on your calendars. The celebration will be held at the Clayton Municipal Complex, Clayton, GA and will feature live music, food, speakers and the opportunity to put your own nail in the I-3 coffin. Watch www.wayssouth.org for more information coming out soon.



Young Voices for Responsible Transportation Blu Chaney – WaysSouth Volunteer Extraordinaire

WaysSouth extends its recognition and thanks to our volunteer Blu Chaney. Blu is a high school senior who grew up in Robbinsville, NC, but recently moved to London, KY. When he read about NCDOT's plans for Corridor K, he was appalled and knew he wanted to get involved. Blu contacted WaysSouth and offered to spend a week in Robbinsville this summer as a volunteer. We jumped at the chance!

Blu's work started in government offices tracking down legal documents that are unavailable online. The information he researched will help us better understand the lay of the land in Graham County. Blu also toured the county talking to businesses and residents about the Corridor K project. He helped explain its costs and benefits, the alternatives and the help that WaysSouth can provide.

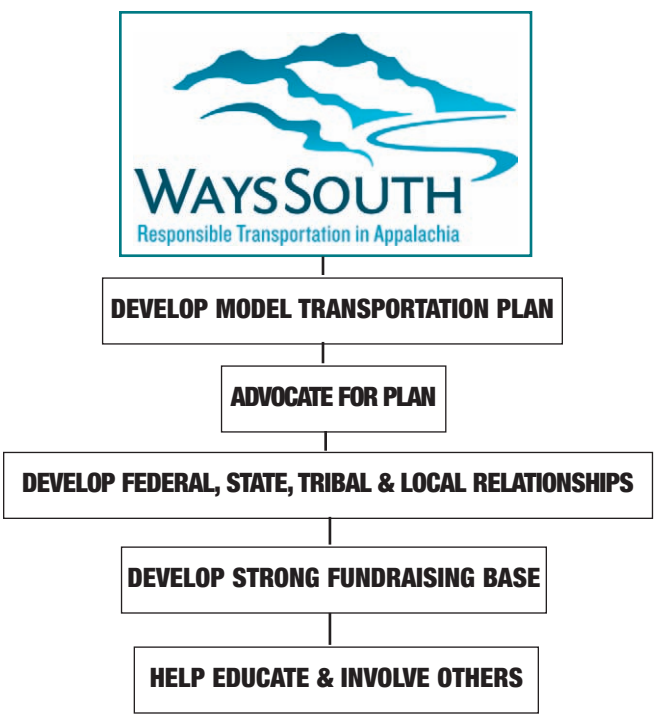
Blu's help will significantly increase WaysSouth's effectiveness in Graham County, and we are grateful for his enthusiasm, ability, and dedication.

Strategic Plan for WaysSouth

The "Strategic Plan" of WaysSouth focuses on goals that support our Mission: To preserve and protect the unique heritage and environment of the Southern Appalachians by promoting sustainable transportation practices.

Each goal listed below supports our priority projects (Stop Interstate 3, Corridor K, U.S. Highway 441, Rail Task Force) and positions WaysSouth for the future.

- Develop a Model of a modern, efficient and context supportive ground transportation system for the Southern Appalachians which is capable of meeting the needs of business, industry and the Southern Appalachian communities in the changing economic environment while preserving the natural environment and respecting the heritage of the area.
- Advocate for government policies, planning and projects consistent with this model.
- Create and maintain working relationships with relevant federal, state, regional, local and tribal officials.
- Develop and maintain a working understanding of existing plans, laws, regulations and other requirements documents of all pertinent federal, regional, state, tribal and local planning agencies.
- Develop a strong and dependable funding base to accomplish our mission and achieve our vision
- Build on the capacity of our Supporting Organization and volunteer base to help educate and involve others.



Contributors to WaysSouth January-July 2011

WaysSouth is deeply grateful to the following financial contributors that have supported the organization in the first half of 2011.

Lucy E. Bartlett
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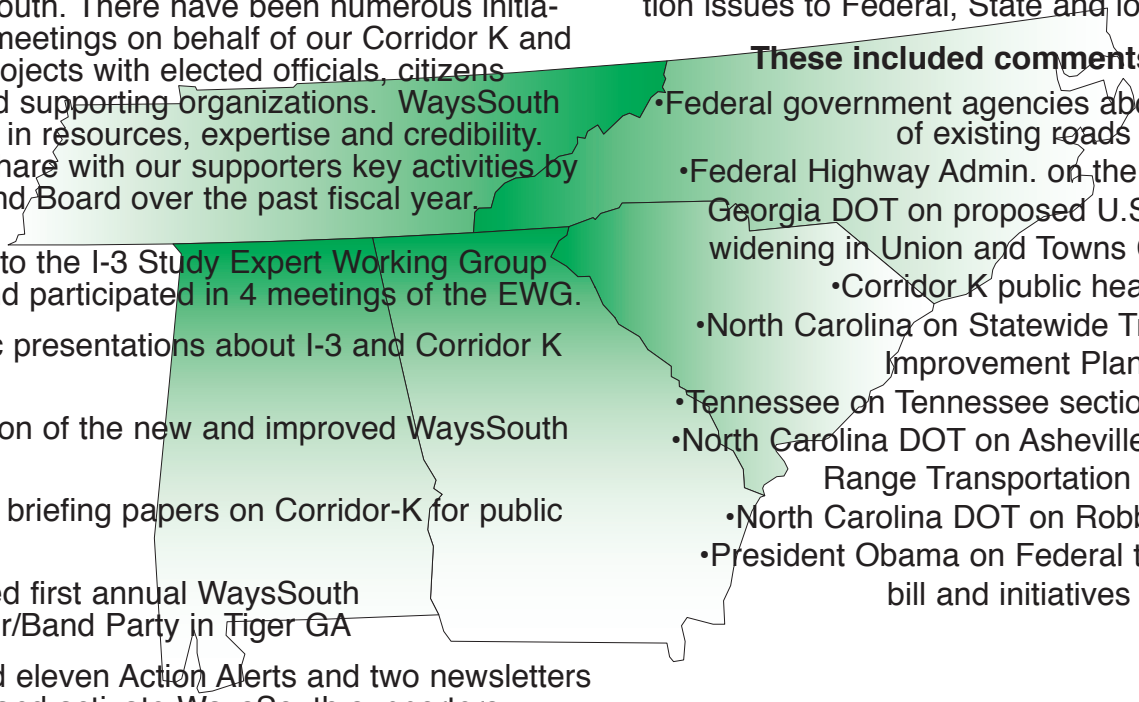
Report on WaysSouth FY 2010-2011 Activities

2010-2011 has been a year of action and progress for WaysSouth. There have been numerous initiatives and meetings on behalf of our Corridor K and Stop I-3 projects with elected officials, citizens groups and supporting organizations. WaysSouth has grown in resources, expertise and credibility. Here we share with our supporters key activities by the staff and Board over the past fiscal year.



- Selected to the I-3 Study Expert Working Group (EWG) and participated in 4 meetings of the EWG.
- Six public presentations about I-3 and Corridor K projects.
- Introduction of the new and improved WaysSouth Website
- Prepared briefing papers on Corridor-K for public hearings.
- Sponsored first annual WaysSouth Fundraiser/Band Party in Tiger GA
- Published eleven Action Alerts and two newsletters to inform and activate WaysSouth supporters.

Action Alert topics included:

I-3 alternatives, webinar announcements and public comment alerts
•Tennessee DOT public meeting announcements and C-K calls for comments
•North Carolina DOT public hearing announcements Corridor K Federal funding
•Asheville NC area Long Range Transportation Plan Appalachian Regional Commission funding

- Prepared/submitted comments on key transportation issues to Federal, State and local governments

These included comments to:

•Federal government agencies about improvement of existing roads
•Federal Highway Admin. on the draft I-3 Study Georgia DOT on proposed U.S. 76/SR 515 widening in Union and Towns Counties GA
•Corridor K public hearing
•North Carolina on Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan
•Tennessee on Tennessee section of Corridor K
•North Carolina DOT on Asheville NC area Long Range Transportation Plan
•North Carolina DOT on Robbinsville NC
•President Obama on Federal transportation bill and initiatives

"We stand ready and excited as WaysSouth moves forward to implement our Strategic Plan in 2011-2012."

Congress Prepares Transportation Reauthorization Bill

Since SAFETEA-LU, the 2005 transportation authorization bill, expired in 2009, there has been no comprehensive program to meet our transportation infrastructure needs. The House leadership recently unveiled an outline for its six-year "Transportation Reauthorization Bill" (available at http://republicans.transportation.house.gov/Media/file/112th/Highways/Reauthorization_document.pdf). The outline is short on detail, and no bill text has been released, but a few things can be determined.

The House bill cuts transportation funding by approximately 34% from FY09 levels. It would likely maintain the historic 80%/20% highway/non-highway ratio of funding, but all programs would suffer significantly. It is unclear how or whether the bill will effectively address the growing backlog of highway and bridge repair needs.

The bill will consolidate and eliminate nearly 70 of the existing 100 transportation programs. Among the programs slated for elimination—and loss of all dedicated funding—are all programs related to bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and high-speed rail. These projects may be eligible for funding if a state chooses.

The bill will include performance measures designed to hold states accountable for their decisions, but it is not clear what factors they will incorporate. There are concerns that highway programs may be held to lower standards of performance than other Federal programs and it is unclear whether innovation and competition will be fostered.

Most highway funds will be distributed via formula to states.

Several provisions to "accelerate project delivery" are indicated in the outline, but these are primarily attacks on the environmental review process. This shortsighted approach is likely to create more problems than it solves.

In the name of deficit reduction and tax-cutting, the House bill as currently proposed will slash investment in the transportation infrastructure that is necessary for economic vitality. WaysSouth is concerned that where it does allow investment, reauthorization will be skewed toward the outdated notion that bigger highways are always the best answer to society's problems.

(Note: The Senate will be considering a two-year funding bill, but we do not yet have any details about it.)

As the reauthorization process proceeds, WaysSouth will continue to monitor and provide information and action alerts, particularly as they relate to the Southern Appalachians and Corridor K.

SPLOST – An Idea To Keep An Eye On

The 2011 Georgia Legislature, facing a large deficit in potential transportation funding, has chosen to use the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) to help get needed additional funding for local transportation projects, roads, bridges and rail. The complicated procedure is described below.

The SPLOST procedure divides the state into 12 planning groups (regions), which have two members (County commissioner, City mayor, etc.) from each county. The counties were directed to prepare a list of suggested transportation projects by 30 March of this year. Currently, these lists are being reviewed by a subset of the planning team members and senior GDOT personnel with the objective of prioritizing the projects for each planning region.

The lists will be presented to the voters of each planning region along with a request that voters approve the adoption of a 1% additional sales tax to last for 10 years with the possibility of

renewal by another vote of the electorate. The vote will be taken in the presidential primary in 2012. If the majority of voters in a region approve the tax it will be levied on all the counties in the region. Twenty five percent of the revenues collected in a given county will be returned to it but the larger share will go to the region as prioritized. Regions that reject the tax will face a penalty of increasing the proposed 10% sharing cost for transportation projects in the counties within the region to 30%. Regions failing to approve the tax will have to wait 24 months before bringing it to the voters again.

The future for the SPLOST idea is not clear. There are questions about the fairness of the prioritization process, the dominance of larger counties over smaller ones, and, of course affordability and the impact of added taxes. WaysSouth encourages our readers to examine carefully the proposals for your respective region.

U.S. 76/SR 515 Upgrade in Towns/Union Counties Georgia

WaysSouth is closely following plans to widening and possibly re-route parts of the U.S. 76/SR 515 highway between Blairsville and Young Harris, GA. GA Department of Transportation (DOT) initially presented a grand design that would widen the highway, complete with a 32 foot median and turning lanes. Four route alternatives would take the highway either straight thru the town of Young Harris or via one of three by-pass routes.

Several of the alternatives being discussed would require considerable dislocation and uprooting along the Right of Way. DOT is now considering alternatives to the alignment presented in Open House meetings attended by the public last spring. When they are finalized, DOT will present them to the public in another set of Open House meetings. WaysSouth will put out the word to supporters when the next meeting dates are announced.

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