



US 70 Corridor Commission

DIRECTOR'S REPORT FOR MONTH OF JULY, 2014 M. DURWOOD STEPHENSON, DIRECTOR

July lies at the center of summer and is generally the peak of vacation time: vacation, a concept preached far more than lived in America, is an idyllic idea that has little in common with the topics and agenda discussed here, except vacation has a direct relationship to tourism, a factor in the need for faster travel along U.S. 70 that supports our coast. Average American workers are awarded 16 days of paid vacation leave annually, but the average worker actually takes only 4 days of vacation yearly. Statisticians report that 61% of those taking vacation days actually work during their vacation. In France and more typical of Europeans, the average worker actually takes 34 days of vacation every year. Perhaps that explains a more stressful workplace in America. For most of us, it offers "down-time": to reflect, assess the past and plan the future, and recommit to tomorrow.

July also is one of the most patriotic and colorful holidays on the fourth day of the month tagged Independence Day wrapped in waving flags and fireworks.

It is a time of much activity and a time that easily descends into dizzy deliberations from all the "noise in the room." We find ourselves squarely in the middle of a transition of projects vying for favorable scoring as we move forward into July, 2015 and the new funding rules of STIP. We also are struggling to cope with declining transportation fund base, both nationally and here in our own State, as vehicles become more energy efficient and the motoring public drives fewer miles. It is also a critical time as the Highway Trust Fund becomes depleted and the funding triggers are expiring.

The National impact is huge, but evaluating selfishly, North Carolina finds approximately 108 projects in jeopardy threatening nearly 20,000 construction jobs.

Although too easy to find problems and focus on the negatives confronting us, it is also the glory days of opportunity. The renowned intellectual, Steve Jobs, once said that the best things often come from unexpected turns. We find ourselves at such a place that demands new vision and the risking of unexpected turns.

M. Durwood Stephenson
Director

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We are a resilient and hardy people and are blessed with sharp minds, willing leaders and a unified citizenry that “gets it” by understanding the necessity of unity and the challenges to be mastered.

It is my belief we have prepared ourselves and our region for this moment. Led by former corridor commission director, Jack Best, Eastern North Carolina MPO/RPO’s united into a 16 member Eastern Coalition. Transportation Advisory Committee Coalition Chairman, Michael Lazzara recently stated: Quote: **“While the transportation funding landscape has changed significantly since the Coalition’s formation in 2012, based on discussions with NCDOT staff and members of the North Carolina General Assembly, it is clear that our mission is more relevant than ever to the project development and delivery process.”** I agree with his assessments: **“Continued effort by the Coalition is needed to advocate for Eastern North Carolina.”**

It should also be noted the support and co-operation provided by our Division Engineers: Jerry Jennings, Division 1; John Rouse, Division 2; Karen Fussell, Division 3; and Tim Little, Division 4, are also key players in the funding game. We are in their debt.

Evidence of an understanding of the importance of transportation improvements by local communities was on record in the Lake Norman region as they debate tolling of I-77 and the commitment of the Wilmington City Council with a unanimous vote to place a referendum for a \$ 55 million transportation bond package on Member’s ballot. Perhaps this is a tactic worthy of consideration on the state-level similar to the GO Bonds of 1996. This debate has begun in small groups of legislators and transportation advocates. More on this effort later.

Media and public interest in the U.S. 70 Economic Impact Study following its release in June has persisted through July. Patrick Johnson, WPTF radio; and Jared Brumbaugh, Producer, Down East Radio have continued the dialogue with on-air discussions. Both radio hosts and their audiences have asked some very pertinent questions and have voiced support and concern on challenges along the Corridor.

The citizens of James City continue to seek information on NCDOT plans for improvements of U.S. 70. They are aware this project scored very well and will be at the top of the funding list in July, 2015 under the new STIP funding formula. Melvin Cooper, local James City leader and I continue the dialogue on the future of James City. Division Engineer, John Rouse is moving forward to engage a consultant to design future improvements. The previous plan has been abandoned and the new consultant will start with a clean slate.

During the past several months, I in concert with the Eastern North Carolina Chambers and NCDOT Secretary Tata have attempted to alert our Directors, readers and interested partners to the implications of a “broke” Highway Trust Fund noted above. Faced with the threat of stopping work on 117,000 transportation projects nationwide, idling an estimated 700,000 workers, the U.S. House approved a temporary band-aid bill to continue funding the Highway Trust Fund for a period of ten (10) months. The legislation provides \$ 10.8 billion

dollars and is a transfer from the general fund, a woefully inadequate sum. As previously reported, N.C. Congressional delegation have repeatedly assured me the future of Highway Trust Fund will be preserved. But the legislation actually passed on July 15 is less than anticipated and varies dramatically from the legislation planned. Throughout these debates, the Senate has promised more aggressive funding, albeit a temporary fix. In conversations with some Senatorial staff assigned to transportation issues on Wednesday, July 30, conceded the best we could hope for at this late date is approval of the House bill.

Thanks to the Carteret County Board of Commissioners for their Resolution supporting the Highway Trust Fund and the distribution of that Resolution to the North Carolina Congressional Delegation.

As predicted the U.S. Senate passed House version of legislation to fund Highway & Mass-Transit projects through May, 2015, acting just hours before U.S. DOT was forced to start reducing or ceasing payments to States. The Senate finally agreed to accept the House version after House rejected a Senate bill passed on Tuesday night (7/29). The Senate proposal of 7/29 would have funded Highway Trust Fund only through December 19, 2014, in order to pressure Congress to pass a multiyear highway bill between November elections and the swearing in of a new Congress in January, 2015. The Senate also expressed concern over the funding source provided in the House bill, called pension smoothing, labeled by Senate as a budget gimmick.

Obviously transportation will continue to be a contested battle well into the future as needs grow greater and revenue sources decline.

Unfortunately, July witnessed reconfirmation of the importance of safety improvements along U.S. 70. On July 5, a 13-year old boy was killed in an accident at Swift Creek Road and U.S. 70 in Wilson's Mills. The accident was a repeat of previous fatalities in this vicinity. One week later, a second fatality less than 5 miles east again proved the necessity of continuing the plan to improve safety. As you are aware, safety improvements are now being planned and debated for that intersection. We can only hope a reasonable solution can be agreed before another life is lost here and project delays because of stream impacts, wetlands, imports, lack of funds and disagreeable public discourse are not impediments to progress. We all share the burden and the challenge of improving the safety of our citizenry.

The US 117/795 Economic Impact Study has now been completed and will be presented on August 21 at Wayne County Transportation Committee. The time and location for the scheduled presentation is now posted on our website.

On July 30, NCDOT and project consultant ICA Engineering Representative, Mark Reep, led a discussion of Project FS-1304A Freeway upgrades of 795/US117 from U.S. 70 in Goldsboro to I-40 connecting cities and industrial centers. At the present time, there are 4 alternatives under consideration. Estimated construction costs vary from \$ 260 million to \$ 310 million exclusive of right of way. With 36 interested individuals in attendance, discussions pressed for more route review and consideration.

The costs and environmental issues pose challenges that must be addressed. Following further review of possible routes, more specific cost estimates are scheduled to be completed on October 14 with a Draft Feasibility Study available on November 14. A Final Feasibility Study will be released in February, 2015.

As noted previously in this report, an Economic Impact Study for planned improvements will be presented by consultants, Cambridge Associates and Sanford-Holshouser Development Group on August 21, 2014. The economic study will not be route specific, but will address the project concept.

At the midpoint of 2014, we should pause to look back toward a journey that began in earnest determined to reverse a downward trend having achieved a small measure of success. The far-off promise of a brighter economic future lies within our group as transportation advocates and commerce supporters, we must learn from history and recognize the challenge of change. The STIP funding formula is before us; how we fit into the evolving formula shall be our measure and the hope for the future. A better Eastern North Carolina isn't just a dream, it is a real possibility if we remain determined and persistent.

We are in the change business and new ideas and other ways to "skin the proverbial cat" will emerge. Within the next few weeks and months we will, hopefully, come forth with new concepts and ideas to continue the journey.