



US 70 Corridor Commission

NOW AKA – INTERSTATE 42 CORRIDOR

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

M. DURWOOD STEPHENSON, DIRECTOR

FOR MONTHS OF MARCH, APRIL & MAY, 2019

As we emerge from winter and transition into Spring, rural Eastern North Carolina remains mired in the devastation wreaked by a series of Hurricanes, floods and above-normal rainfall. Hurricanes Matthew, Florence and Michael within the past 3 years have challenged the patience of our population and the financial resources available and necessary for recovery. It has been necessary to divert NCDOT program dollars from intended purposes to emergency funds to return families and citizens to a more normal habitable environment.

Unfortunately, our transportation agenda and planned schedule for proposed Interstate 42 has become a victim as Secretary Trogdon has been forced to adjust schedules in the face of declining cash balances. Hopefully the funds will be reimbursed by FEMA and other responsible Federal Agencies within a reasonable time frame – but probably a minimum of 3 to 5 years. The revised and delayed new schedules reflect anticipated reimbursement schedules.

The other caveat that clouds the hopes and plans of the Interstate 42 agenda is the possibility of another series of devastating storms. As of the writing of this report, a total of \$ 1.58 billion has been allocated for Hurricane recovery, but little or none, of which I am aware, to address flood mitigation or minimization. It will happen again. We can only hope it is not soon, in order to give us and the funding tools available, an opportunity to recover.

There have been studies initiated by Emergency Management and NCDOT to address the issue, but no substantive, affordable remedies beyond storm measurement suggestions have been proffered.

As I have previously reported, Leilani Paugh, in concert with NCDOT's Flood Studies has engaged with the renowned Dutch Water Ambassador and his staff to identify and enact flood control measures to protect our major highways, homes and businesses.

For the first time ever, the recent storms have impacted Eastern North Carolina's Interstates, I-95 and I-40. Climatologists are predicting these unprecedented storm levels of the past 3 years are sure to continue and possibly may establish even higher flood levels.

M. Durwood Stephenson
Director

P.O. Box 1187 ♦ Smithfield, NC 27577 ♦ (919) 934-1249 ♦ DurwoodUS70@gmail.com

The Dutch have successfully averted storm disasters and have become a model for the World. Following a massive storm in 2010, the French started a program, perhaps the first in the world, focused on minimizing coastline development. The program models the Dutch program by avoiding development in high risk communities. The French program focused on relocation of buildings back from the oceanfront and prohibiting new construction in flood prone areas.

Orrin H. Pilkey, James B. Duke Professor Emeritus, Earth and Ocean Sciences at Duke University has been a frequent critic of overdevelopment of ocean fronts and flood prone areas. In a recent article, he cites the similarities of the problems of the French and the problems of the Carolinas. As Mr. Pilkey reports, leading French scientists began their caution in 1999, with little notice or no response. In 2010, fifty-seven people living along the coastline in France died in their beds and many others were trapped in their homes. The hard-earned, critical lesson mandated action and a response to the earlier warnings became reality as the first of its kind of program became the law of the land.

In an article published in the News & Observer in February 2019, Mr. Pilkey reminds us of the French 2010 debacle, comparing events of our own Coast to the 2010 French coast events. The article offers suggestions to protect our coastline and to save lives; **“We must move back or demolish threatened buildings. And after future storms, we should prohibit repair or replacement of damaged buildings. All of these events are happening right now.”**

It is not my wish or purpose to take sides in this argument, but we must admit, earlier warnings, have in the past three years been realized. I do believe it is worthy of close scrutiny and careful consideration.

As one scientist has written: **“We have now reached the point when the cost of investing in something new has now fallen below the costs of doing nothing.”** To localize, the \$ 1.58 billion allocated for past three (3) years of devastating storms now probably exceeds the cost to enact programs to minimize future flooding.

Or as Isaac Asimov said it, **“The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.”**

In an effort to expedite storm recovery efforts, both State and Federal funding are planning forward in an effort to avoid the costly devastation of the past three (3) years. Leaders from Eastern North Carolina communities have banded together and formally organized the **Eastern N.C. Disaster Recovery and Resiliency Alliance**. The Alliance formalized and presented their priorities to State Legislators and Federal officials in Washington, D.C. including:

- Expediting resources for roads and other forms of transportation to make sure there is adequate evacuation and access for emergency personnel.
- Improve public roads and buildings to lower the risk of collapse during hurricanes – especially primary traffic routes like I-95 and I-40 at last event.
- Dedicate significant dollars to building affordable housing to get lower income families out of flood plains as suggested by Orrin H. Pilkey and actually enacted by France following deadly storms in 2010. State Senator Harper Peterson wrote “Our world has changed, and we need to come together in a nonpartisan way. This is a crisis that will continue and repeat itself.”

We have begun an effort to join forces with the Alliance as our agenda shares commonality.

Technology experts who have been predicting driverless cars, now admit a pedestrian fatality in Arizona by an autonomous vehicle has slowed the progress and acceptance of the concept without further testing and more advanced technology in our cities and towns. Uber, Amazon and other autonomous vehicle advocates now admit, for cars traveling complex city environments is not going to be legal and accepted by the maturing public within the immediate future as most artificial intelligence proponents now predict widespread use of driverless vehicles is at least five years away.

Like so many of our industries, the \$ 700 billion trucking industry is being radically transformed by new technology and leads the autonomous vehicle parade. The idea of robotic 40-ton tractor-trailers speeding down public roads is both exciting and terrifying.

Arizona and Texas have already legalized autonomous long-distance trucking with a safety driver and engineer on-board. The trucking industry is predicting truck deliveries will be making runs “driver-out” by early next year (2020).

The American Trucking Association reports a shortage of more than 60,000 semi-operators a year, citing autonomous truck deliveries, an economic necessity for the industry and delivery of goods.

Market demand and basic economics could trump jitters about putting 40-ton driverless trucks on the road and ease restrictions on self-driving vehicles coast to coast. It must happen soon for trucking and to sustain economic processes.

The need for unencumbered movement corridors escalates as congestion management becomes an obstacle to the movement of people and goods. Once an insignificant factor, logistics is now a major consideration in all economic equations. All businesses must deal with the added expenses directly attributable to poor and inadequate infrastructure. Although a factor, time is not the only factor created by inadequate and deteriorating infrastructure. Congestion directly impacts the environment and increases costs of products for consumers. In many areas, particularly rural, communities lack high speed internet and many do not have access to reliable cell phone service, an absolute necessity in today’s environment.

The Trump Administration and his nemesis, Democrats in Congress, have agreed The Nation needs \$ 2 trillion for infrastructure upgrades, but neither side seems poised to proceed to enact funding for infrastructure. In America, and again especially rural America, transportation is critical to daily life. An estimated 83% of Americans regularly drive to their jobs and to most quality of life sustaining appointments.

As our elected leaders in America from all political affiliations continues to ignore the crumbling infrastructure throughout our Nation, despite the warnings and obvious determination we are falling behind. China has released a plan to spend more than \$ 1 trillion on China’s Roads and Global Infrastructure initiatives.

Although not at the top of rural North Carolina’s challenge list, congestion is a National and International issue. In the extreme, London has imposed a Congestion Management Fee assessing a significant fee to drive a vehicle into the limits of the City. Within the past few weeks, the City of New York has followed London’s lead becoming the first City in United States to enact the fee. The amount of the fee has not yet been determined, but is reported to be, like London, significant.

As we are all aware, Eastern N.C. and its agricultural pursuits is the largest economic engine in N.C. providing more than \$ 12.5 billion in revenue annually. It is a historical role that has sustained the East for generations of farm families. We are notably the bread basket for the world, but as the farming population ages and is abandoned by younger family members, the challenge of feeding an escalating

world population becomes more difficult. Unfortunately, it is a trend seen throughout rural America. Almost 30 million acres of U.S. farmland is now owned by investors from Canada, Germany, China and other foreign countries – a percentage that has doubled over the past two decades. Foreign ownership is expected to increase in the years ahead because our American farmers are approaching retirement with no successor family members willing to assume those roles.

Hunger has been identified as one of this Century's most urgent problems. The planet must produce more food in the next four decades than all farmers in history have harvested over the past 8,000 years. By the year 2050, the Earth will be home to as many as 10 billion people, an increase of approximately 2.5 billion. Researchers and visionaries at N.C. State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences are now working on solutions to increase agricultural efficiencies and yields.

In addition to an aging issue of farm operators, land ownership, the frustration of available farm workers and marginalized profits are all challenges that may overwhelm the pursuit of farming as a vocation and force the world to look elsewhere to grow the foods necessary to feed the world.

The maximizing of yields and efficiencies of crops must be coupled with new harvesting and production technology to overcome the worker shortages and loss of land. The North Carolina Rural Center recently reported another challenge facing our North Carolina farmers; a 61 percent decline in small business lending with a decrease in available funding of more than \$ 1.6 billion between 2005 and 2015 with 165 rural bank branch closures.

As we diligently struggle for solutions through the first quarter of 2019, we must look in the rear-view mirror that is 2018. Once again, and appropriately so, we are forced to evaluate the urban/rural divide and the tale of two North Carolinas: lack of adequate infrastructure coupled with geographic vulnerabilities in the rural East compared to urban communities that lead the Nation in many economic growth lists.

I know we tire of the repetitive stories of the urban/rural divide; but as historians also constantly remind us the tendency and seemingly circle of history repeating itself.

This is a story and history that began in North Carolina in the 1930's as former News & Observer reporter and now best-selling author Rob Christensen in his most recent book, **The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics** reminds us with his research and writing. Quote: **"North Carolina saves the beginning of the sharp political divide in 1930's between urban and rural interests. Bankers, textile-mill owners and utility company executives promoted urban interests opposed by tobacco farmers and shop-keepers of Eastern North Carolina promoting interests."**

Borrowing again from author, Christensen's research and historical reference:

Following depression era post financial crash of 1929, Governor O. Max Gardner consulted Brookings Institute requesting a study of State Government to assure financial stability of Towns, Counties and the State of North Carolina. Several initiatives evolved from that study:

- **Consolidation of 3 main State supported College campuses**
 - UNC at Chapel Hill**
 - State College in Raleigh (NCSU)**
 - College of Women in Greensboro**
- **Reduce 92 State Agencies to 14 agencies.**
- **State elective offices from 13 to 3**

- **Consolidate counties (mergers)**
- **Transfer of road system ownership and maintenance from Counties to State creating N.C. Department of Transportation on July 31, 1931 totaling approximately 45,000 miles of roads funded by gas tax.**

Desperate times necessitate dramatic action. With recent challenges experienced in Eastern North Carolina, we as citizens and leaders must be bold and innovative as our challenges threaten our region and our future. We continue to lose population and opportunity. The issues that have been noted above must be addressed with new and bold actions and programs.

Despite the many challenges, there are good things happening. On April 24, 2019, North Carolina Department of Transportation Secretary, Jim Trogdon, marked a milestone, breaking ground for the Carolina Connector Intermodal Rail Hub. Governor Cooper said, **“This intermodal facility will positively impact Eastern North Carolina and our State as a whole. CCX will not only bring good paying jobs to our rural areas but also connect the region to both domestic and international markets.”**

On April 4, 2019, North Carolina’s East Alliance under the direction of President, John Chaffee met in Greenville for their annual state of the state conference. Future employment opportunities in the region and the role of STEM education was emphasized by renowned speakers and presenters.

In his continuing quest to improve transportation in our State and to prepare for a changing logistics environment, Transportation Secretary Trogdon, has established a Commission to create future Transportation strategy. The Commission will research the impact of emerging technologies and evolving demographics to develop new and better ways to meet the need for critical infrastructure resources for the future.

Governor Cooper announced in May the award of \$ 10 million in grants to expand Internet Access in 19 rural counties for broadband expansion. It is another critical infrastructure to serve business, students, communities and rural citizens. Eric Boyette, State CIO and Secretary of the Department of Information Technology said, **“Too many communities across the State lack broadband speeds that are critical to doing homework, applying for a job, or seeing a doctor without leaving home.”**

Division 2 has awarded a contract to Three Oaks Engineering to begin a study for a future I-42 project to upgrade existing U.S. 70 to Interstate standards from Thrumman Road (SR 1116) to the Havelock Bypass in Craven County. This project is State funded with hopes and expectations of receiving Federal funding in the future. The current State funding is programmed only for planning and environmental studies with post year right of way and construction dates planned for escalation with Design-Build proposed.

A meeting of local officials followed by a public comment session was held in Princeton on May 21. This project is another critical U.S. 70 improvement project elevating to Interstate status (I-42) from Goldsboro Bypass to West of Pondfield Road in Wayne and Johnston Counties. The event was well attended and the comments that I observed and heard were, for the most part positive and encouraging. It appears the citizens, business owners and elected officials now understand the significance of an Interstate Highway along this Corridor.

The North Carolina Chamber sponsored a Transportation & Infrastructure Summit on May 23, 2019 in Durham, North Carolina. Former House Representative, Bill Brawley led a discussion on The Importance of Efficiency in Spending followed by Representative John Torbett on Creating More Diversified Streams of Funding – a critical topic as road needs escalate and dollars funded by a declining gas tax erodes. NCDOT Secretary, Jim Trogdon provided an update on the State of Transportation in North Carolina. Following lunch, presentations were made on the Future of Moving Goods and People, closing the day with a very current topic on recent Storm Impacts.

A couple of notes of historical interest occurred during this reporting period: The new NC 12 Bridge was named for former North Carolina Senator Marc Basnight, a native of Manteo and a strong advocate for coastal communities during his long service from 1984 until 2011. The North Carolina House, one of only seven states that does not currently broadcast sessions by video, has voted to begin video broadcasting its daily sessions. The historic vote also created a study to evaluate the interest and costs to create a dedicated television channel to the sessions. Another bow to new technology and political transparency.

These days the challenges feel bigger than a mountain; in addition to a lack of modern-day infrastructure, an escalated project “let” scheduled initiated by Secretary Trogdon, has been sabotaged by hurricanes and weather.

It is our task to keep pushing forward, keep climbing – reaching for the summit even as we trudge through rough terrain.

See you at the Beach in July.