



US 70 Corridor Commission

DIRECTOR'S REPORT FOR MONTH OF FEBRUARY, 2013 M. DURWOOD STEPHENSON, DIRECTOR

February is the second month of the year and the shortest. Initially it was the last month of the year and in the beginning, it had 30 days. But the needs and wishes of determined leaders metamorphosed February to bend to their preferences.

February is also a paradox; generally cold and often dark, but sufficient sunny days to give promise to spring. Perceived as a harsh winter month, but filled with many special days of remembrance to turn the focus from weather to celebration: Presidents Day, Candlemas Day, Groundhog Day, Valentine's Day with an occasional extra day added to make it unique.

Like February, Eastern N.C. is a region of paradox; blessed with great natural beauty, but void of critical infrastructure; invaluable assets – rich soil for agricultural production, a strong military presence that blends well with agricultural pursuits, rail, tourism, a natural port and the Global TransPark; but a region in decline – population out-migration, high rates of poverty, stagnant commerce and decline of manufacturing has led a region with a proud heritage to an area of failed promise.

But like the historical leaders of the days of Julius Caesar who transitioned February, Eastern North Carolina is blessed with strong, determined leaders who will reverse the fortunes and future of Eastern N.C.

We have good ideas and we have mapped a strategy to an agenda that holds promise for a more prosperous Eastern North Carolina. But each of us as a body must self examine, asking ourselves if we are unselfishly and totally committed to the region and are we willing to sacrifice small conveniences and benefits personally for the greater good.

We began this journey of improvement with five (5) counties along the U.S. 70 Corridor, expanded to seven (7) that is now forty-one counties with the Eastern RPO/MPO Coalition joining our support team.

M. Durwood Stephenson

Director

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In order to progress the agenda at current pace, it is necessary to accelerate the persistent, continuous effort of the past three years.

On February 1, Jeff Miles, a 20-year veteran of maritime transportation, was appointed Acting Executive Director of the North Carolina State Ports Authority.

The Port at Morehead City is on the threshold of great opportunity. Our challenge at the Corridor Commission is to aid them by promoting rail and freeway access to the port.

Agricultural crops are the number one product of Eastern N.C. and represents a major source for export. Marketing and agricultural interests advise approximately 90 percent of agricultural crops travel east-west: to the Port and to the urban center marketplace outside the region. U.S. 70 is the only viable east-west transportation route for traveling, thus reconfirming the necessity and importance of U.S. 70 as a freeway at a minimum.

On February 3, the Johnston County Commissioners appointed the following individuals to the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission

Honorable Don Rains, Mayor of Princeton – Reappointment
Frank Price, Engineer – Reappointment
Honorable Ted Godwin, Commissioner – New Appointment
Richard Hicks, Interim Manager, Wilson’s Mills – New Appointment

For the past several years, there have been many conversations on the importance of reconnecting the rail line between Castle Hayne and Wallace. The possibility of that rail improvement plan has been enhanced by legislation sponsored by State Representative Susi Hamilton and Representative Phil Sheppard.

Admittedly the cost of the project is high. In 2004 it was estimated at \$ 80 million. Today’s costs will be significantly higher. Finding adequate funding will be difficult, but the benefits of completing the line are worthy of the effort. In addition to opportunities for economic development in the region, benefits will also accrue to the ports and to the military.

Newly appointed NCDOT Secretary, Tony Tata, wants more emphasis put on commerce and job creation in determining spending of too few transportation dollars. Governor McCrory was a strong advocate for expansion of infrastructure to promote economic prosperity during his gubernational campaign. Secretary Tata has asked staff to enhance funding formula to increase scoring for jobs and commerce. General Trogdon previously revised project funding scoring with an increase in points for projects serving the military.

The emphasis on commerce by the Governor and Secretary Tata coupled with a bonus for military infrastructure represents an advantage and opportunity for Eastern North Carolina.

A safety and accessibility project on U.S. 70 in Johnston County at Davis Mill Road in Pine Level may encounter some delays due to issues encountered during planning for right of way acquisition. Discovery of an unanticipated cemetery and utility relocations have slowed the process, but right of way acquisition is underway. Funding for the project is available with construction start planned for 2014.

Conversations about transportation eventually turn to funding sources. It is a topic of legitimate concern in North Carolina and nationally. We all know the story; a declining funding source based on gas taxes that historically have escalated. But more fuel efficient cars coupled with less driving have eroded this pool of dollars. The State of Virginia has enacted legislation that completely overhauls transportation funding. Some are suggesting a tax based on miles driven. Those in opposition cite privacy issues to be sacrificed to monitor individual mileage. Transportation experts admit the cost to administer a VMT system will be expensive. Some have also suggested a VMT will cost the individual driver 2 to 3 times the cost currently being paid for gasoline tax. Currently in our State, tolling is being utilized in some more urban areas as roads of convenience. It is not a concept that has been widely accepted by the motoring public. A study on tolling of I-95 has received strong opposition. Funding will continue to be debated at length with no preferred system anticipated soon. Some have suggested tolling may eventually win the debate as least odorous option.

The Eastern North Carolina MPO/RPO Coalition met in February. Director Joel Strickland is conducting an email survey. I encourage you to respond to the survey in order to assist the leadership in future planning. The next meeting of ENC MPO/RPO Coalition is scheduled for April 11 in Goldsboro. Ms. Jo Laurie Penrose of Greenville MPO was elected Assistant Director for Coalition.

The equity formula continues to be an issue that is of considerable concern in rural regions. As we have discussed repeatedly, the metropolitan centers have a majority in the General Assembly and the power to redirect equity funding. Although we do not have the strength of numbers, we do have a strong Eastern delegation that will make every effort to negotiate the best possible scenario for Eastern North Carolina. As Representative Jimmy Dixon said, "I am first and foremost an Eastern North Carolina legislator." That sentiment is prevalent throughout our Eastern delegation.

On February 28, I had an opportunity to meet with Secretary Tata to brief him on the goals and objectives of the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission. The purposes and agenda of the Corridor Commission to promote and develop commerce in Eastern North Carolina are in concert with the priorities of the Governor and Secretary Tata. In addition to the verbal briefing, I provided a written statement for review by the Secretary. A copy of that statement is attached.

We are all aware of the significance of an interstate shield. Over the years we have been repeatedly reminded by national and international marketing officials of the necessity of an interstate highway within 10 miles of any proposed major industrial or commercial

development. A lack of access to an interstate or freeway has been the major criticism of the Global Transpark.

Although the primary agenda of the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission is to establish a freeway corridor along U.S. 70 from I-40 in Wake County to the Port at Morehead City, we have for the past three (3) years been exploring the feasibility of an interstate designation for U.S. 70.

In recent months the Mayors of Ayden, Greenville and Kinston have met to discuss Interstate designation for U.S. 264 and U.S. 70. Several towns, MPO's and RPO's have adopted Resolutions of Support for proceeding to plan for interstate designation in the East. Plans have been in process for some time to connect regional routes designated as 795. The last piece of that connection in Wayne County appears eminent. Although no official position has been adopted by the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission membership, it is my personal opinion that we should join the effort to promote completion of the planned 795 connector and begin the lengthy process of educating ourselves and area citizens on the procedure necessary to achieve interstate status for U.S. 70 and U.S. 264.

There are several pieces of legislation pending in the General Assembly that impact transportation in our State. We will continue to monitor the legislation and keep the membership informed of any legislation that may impact the Corridor Commission agenda.

Kristine O'Connor, project manager for U.S. 70 Corridor Commission, is working diligently to finalize agreements with selected vendor, Cambridge Systematics, Inc. In recent conversations, vendor has offered to make a personal presentation of data to Secretary Tata when study is complete.

Since there are no significant changes in status of Corridor Commission projects, I will not provide a detailed analysis in this report. If anyone has any specific questions regarding status of a project, please contact me and I will respond promptly.

One of our greatest challenges is persuading urban citizenry and leaders they too have a stake in reviving an ailing rural economy. The arguments are obvious: Investing in rural North Carolina benefits the State's economy as a whole: A bifurcated economy is not healthy and not sustainable for long because as evidenced, rural North Carolina will and has become a drain on other areas of the State. The rural East has a large labor pool; it also produces essential goods like food stock for our population; it also improves foreign trade balances with agricultural exports that exceed imported goods.

The leadership of Eastern North Carolina has been very successful in expanding the support base in the East. Perhaps we now should expand that base to include our more affluent neighbors to the West. Any ideas?



US 70 Corridor Commission

February 25, 2013

Mr. Tony Tata
Secretary
N.C. Department of Commerce

U.S. 70 Highway between Raleigh and Morehead City is a major arterial link in the State's transportation system. It is identified as Corridor 46 in the North Carolina Department of Transportation Strategic Highway Corridor System. Strategic highways are vital links between communities and serve as essential corridors for commerce, trade, tourism and recreational travels.

The U.S. 70 Corridor Commission was established approximately 5 years ago by elected leaders and community leaders throughout Eastern North Carolina. The primary focus of the Corridor Commission is to promote the development of Strategic Highway Corridor 46 (U.S. 70) as Freeway from I-40 in Wake County to the Port at Morehead City.

The U.S. 70 Corridor Commission constitutes a joint effort among state and local political jurisdictions along the US 70 Corridor in Wayne, Lenoir, Jones, Craven, and Carteret Counties with a long-term, mutual interest in retrofitting the corridor as North Carolina's next major access managed highway. Stakeholders along US 70 agree that consensus among state and local political jurisdictions demonstrates a unified vision for the corridor – "One Vision, One Voice." Grassroots support for short-term and long-term improvements identified by the US 70 Corridor Commission should attract the resources needed for expediting a new access managed highway, which will serve as the catalyst for economic development along the corridor.

Although the top priority and first objective is to promote development of U.S. 70 as a Freeway, our agenda also includes promoting all major assets in the East: agriculture, military, tourism, ports, rail and Global TransPark.

Marketing experts and those firms and groups responsible for locating commerce have advised that major industrial and commercial developments demand a Freeway within 10 miles of proposed developments and the potential work force. The Freeway also should have a direct link to an Interstate route.

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The North Carolina Board of Transportation has established a full standing committee of NCDOT for U.S. 70 Corridor Commission agenda. The Board of Transportation working in concert with General Assembly delegation, local elected officials, business and community interests and NCDOT professional staff have made significant progress in converting U.S. 70 into a freeway.

Notable achievements include:

- Escalate Goldsboro Bypass from 2035 completion date to 2015
- Record of Decision for Havelock Bypass
- Reduce traffic signals for I-40 in Wake County to Port at Morehead City
 - 2007 – 86 Signals
 - 2008 – 70 Signals
 - 2012 – 60 Signals
 - 2015 – 49 Signals Projected
 - 2019 – 33 Signals Projected
 - 2020 – 10 Signals Projected

One of the most significant achievements has been the expansion of the support base. The original six counties have now expanded to 41 Eastern North Carolina Counties with all MPO's & RPO's in those 41 counties actively pursuing a common agenda. Known as the Eastern North Carolina Coalition, this group has promoted regional projects with the following projects endorsed by the Coalition as top priorities:

- Greenville Southwest Bypass
- Hampstead Bypass
- Kinston Bypass
- Maysville Bypass
- NC 11/241/24 Connector
- NC 24 Upgrade
- Slocum Gates

Governor McCrory emphasized and you recently reconfirmed a commitment to provide priority funding for projects that promote commerce and jobs. The Corridor Commission has engaged Cambridge Associates to complete an Economic Impact Study for U.S. 70 in Eastern North Carolina. The study should be completed in June, 2013. Upon completion it should provide data supporting the viability of our region for economic opportunity in our region and enable us to secure equitable funding for projects in the East along U.S. 70 Corridor.

Thank you for your interest in this effort to promote commerce, our military and other significant assets improving opportunity and the future of the East.