



# US 70 Corridor Commission

## DIRECTOR'S REPORT FOR MONTH OF JUNE, 2012 M. DURWOOD STEPHENSON, DIRECTOR

The primary focus during the month of June has been the deliberations of the General Assembly. Although we at the Corridor Commission have had fewer formal meetings during the month, the level of activity and support of our agenda has been spirited and intense throughout the region.

I have with many of you monitored the discussions, legislation and agenda of the General Assembly especially those issues pertaining to transportation. I must acknowledge the critical role Julie White, Director of Major Metropolitan Mayors Association, has played in tracking transportation legislation. She has closely monitored all transportation meetings and has daily communicated the actions of legislators.

On June 1, Dennis Lyons, Product Development Officer for Amtrak, contacted me soliciting support from Craven County for Amtrak passenger rail service in New Bern Area. I conveyed the request to County Manager Jack Veit and Corridor commission Representative Tom Mark.

At the request of the Legislature, Michelle Beck of the Program Evaluation Division of General Assembly is leading a study and evaluation of the North Carolina Railroad Company. According to Ms. Beck, the committee will review stated corporate mission of NCR, the economic benefits, the potential value of NCR and the current corporate operations of the Company. The General Assembly Focus Group had a first meeting in the East on June 6 in Goldsboro. I assume the study will continue and additional meetings will be scheduled. I encourage you to attend meetings in your area and to take the opportunity to promote our railroad and its benefits to our State and particularly Eastern North Carolina. In addition to a renaissance of freight rail, Amtrak is currently expanding passenger rail service in Eastern North Carolina with a projected initial user population of approximately 50,000. The NCR does not depend on tax payer dollars for operations, maintenance and expansion. NCR has spent several million dollars of its revenue on rail improvements in Eastern North Carolina in recent years.

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Director

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Early budget discussions indicate disparity in spending priorities between Governor's budget and General Assembly members. However, both have agreed to cap North Carolina's tax on motor fuels at 37.5 ¢ a gallon. Discussions among legislators also indicated considerations may favor cutting the gas tax further in future years.

In discussions with several legislators, I found general consensus among most that it is time to seek other more stable revenue sources for transportation infrastructure. Highway revenues per mile driven have been declining for decades. Government spending for transportation is the only decrease in State programs while expenditures for education, health and human services and crime control have continued to escalate, some at alarming rates.

The U.S. 70 Corridor Commission Board of Transportation Committee met in Raleigh on June 6. Rob Hanson and staff provided an update on all key corridor projects. Since all of you closely monitor projects status, I will not provide detailed project by project analysis, but will mention a few key current status updates.

1. Kinston Bypass
  - On-going checking of wetland models has been underway for several months.
  - Preliminary cost estimates and ROW Cost estimates scheduled for completion late June, 2012.
2. Havelock Bypass
  - Avoidance & minimization meeting (CP4A) – Late 2012
3. U.S. 70 Improvements at Wilson's Mills
  - Consultant engaged – Arcadis
  - Suggest project scoping be scheduled for August, 2012
4. U.S. 70 Improvements at Pine Level
  - Begin ROW acquisition, June, 2012
5. Gallant's Channel Bridge
  - Awaiting USCG permit/COE 404 permit
  - Failure to obtain USCG will delay construction let scheduled for July, 2012
  - Anticipate letter from FFA detailing issues with airport if bridge height exceeds 65-feet

The meeting concluded with presentation and encouragement from General Trogon. The following points of emphasis were noted:



- We are now in financially constrained environment.
- Regional projects high priority
- We all share same destiny
- Projects get traction with strong local consensus
- Unify vision, support with data
- U.S. 70 is an opportunity, not a challenge
- Coalition of RPO's & MPO's key

As we were meeting in Raleigh, Eastern RPO's and MPO's were meeting to plan and organize formal coalition agreements. This group and this coalition is the key to the future of transportation in Eastern North Carolina. A formal organizational document is being prepared under the direction of Daniel VanLiere who was elected Executive Director of the coalition. Jo Penrose, Greenville MPO, was elected to serve as Assistant Director and Jennifer Collins, Goldsboro MPO, was elected secretary. This is a giant step forward for Eastern North Carolina and a "first" for the region. In the words of Director Daniel VanLiere, "We have a greater voice together than we do independently." This coalition represents a large number of elected officials and a major segment of the population of Eastern North Carolina. Daniel and coalition staff is working on an agenda that should be finalized by late August, 2012. We at the Corridor Commission owe a debt of gratitude to these hard-working, determined individuals.

There are significant differences in Transportation budget of House and Senate. I will wait for final completion and approval of budget before analyzing Transportation budget. In these difficult economic conditions all public spending is strained both State and Nationally.

One of the objectives of Corridor Commission is to escalate Part C, Harvey Parkway. Currently the Feasibility Study is scheduled for completion in July, 2013. I have asked Derrick Lewis to explore opportunities to complete in 2012. I have also asked General Trogdon to consider engaging a consultant for this task if staff cannot achieve that objective. Conceptual designs are scheduled for completion this month with cost estimates anticipated by Fall, 2012. It appears to me a 2012 completion is possible.

On June 14, I had an opportunity to deliver a brief narrative on history and current status of Coast Guard permit for Gallant's Channel Bridge to Congressman Butterfield via Jack Best. The narrative suggested the Congressman review the data, but take no action until NCDOT has exhausted all options including a letter from FFA regarding the consequences of a taller bridge which would probably necessitate closing of a major adjacent runway. Hopefully that letter will be forthcoming.

On June 16, Amtrak announced plans to expand passenger rail service to Eastern North Carolina with a motor coach connecting passenger between Wilson and Morehead City with connecting service in several towns along this rail corridor. Passengers can connect to Palmetto line in Wilson which operates two trains daily between New York and Savannah, Georgia with

access to the Amtrak national network serving more than 500 stations in 46 states, the District of Columbia and three Canadian provinces.

We have been discussing this proposal since January, 2011 and are grateful to Dennis Lyons of Amtrak for preserving the plan after it appeared to be doomed earlier this year.

The **News & Observer** named General Trogdon TAR HEEL OF THE WEEK in the Sunday edition on June 17. If you have not seen the article but would like to, please email me and I will forward a copy to you. We are indeed fortunate to have the General's strong and resourceful leadership leading transportation in North Carolina.

On June 18, Corridor Commission Subcommittee Chairman, Jack Best scheduled a meeting of that committee for later in June to discuss several key projects and plan future agenda.

Marcia surveyed the membership and scheduled the next Corridor Commission meeting for Thursday, August 23, 2:00 PM at MDS Center, 206 Skyland Drive, Smithfield.

I met with Division Engineer, John Rouse and Tim Little and discussed Johnston County projects, particularly to review Wilson's Mills project. An overly presumptive newspaper article created much debate and some controversy.

The last section (Western) of the Goldsboro Bypass was bid on June 19. S.T. Wooten was low bidder. The other good news is the low bid was \$ 62.4 million, nearly \$ 5 million below DOT engineers estimate. That is good news for Division 4 equity funds.

Since joining the Corridor Commission, there has been considerable conversation, and many discussions among Corridor Commission members and area Board of Transportation members about the economic impact of the Corridor agenda. Shortly after joining the team and consultation with Corridor leadership we engaged a team from East Carolina University to provide an economic development analysis. Unfortunately a few weeks into the assignment the key members of the staff relocated and the team leader was disrupted by family illness. Eventually the team dissipated and we were committed to other agenda promotion activities.

With our agenda clearly defined and momentum towing us along, the importance of an economic and feasibility analysis is obviously a necessity to assist our partners and leadership in maintaining enthusiasm and persistence in staying the course and winning public support for change.

On June 20, I began contacting potential sources for economic development studies and discussed the plan with Department of Commerce. Currently I am drafting Request For Proposal (RFP) to solicit interested vendors for this report. I solicit your suggestions in identifying the scope and end-use of this report. I am hopeful a final draft of the RFP can be completed by early to mid August. If there is sufficient interest from vendors and we can

identify funding sources, a final report should be available in early 2013. In addition to an impetus for Corridor Commission, the report should be an invaluable tool for Towns, counties, economic development teams, RPO's and MPO's as they market their regions and products.

The Virginia Department of Transportation has proposed new tolls on I-95 in Sussex County near Emporia. The proposal is considering \$ 4 tolls for passenger vehicles and \$ 12 for trucks and will be collected from north and south bound vehicles. VDOT estimates the toll will collect \$ 35 to \$ 40 million annually and will be utilized for improvements to I-95. The push-back from locals is reminiscent of the opposition arguments prevalent in North Carolina. Federal approval will be required.

On June 27, the Corridor Commission Subcommittee chaired by Jack Best met in Kinston. Primary topics included escalating the following projects:

- US 70 Improvements at Wilson's Mills
- US 70 Improvements at Pine Level
- Part C, Harvey Parkway
- Connect CSX Rail Line to GTP
- Engage local leaders and Congressional Delegation to aid NCDOT in securing Coast Guard permits for Gallant's Channel Bridge
- Encourage local citizens to promote Havelock Bypass
- Move forward ASAP with RFP to employ a firm to provide economic development analysis and promotion along U.S. 70 Corridor in Eastern North Carolina. As reported earlier in this report identifying qualified firms has already begun. I solicit your assistance in securing funding for this project. Corridor Chairman and Goldsboro City Councilman, Chuck Allen has suggested Goldsboro MPO may be able to assist with funding. This report will be available and a valuable tool for all development agencies in the five (5) counties served by Corridor Commission. Any financial assistance is appreciated and any specific information you wish to be included in report will be included in RFP if you advise immediately as we prepare RFP.

Scott Chase and I discussed local efforts to promote U.S. 70 Corridor projects and commitment to Slocum Gate Interchange. Scott and the leadership in Havelock have initiated lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C. We plan to meet again this month for more specific discussion to co-ordinate our efforts in promoting these projects.

As agreed at our last Corridor meeting, the staff of Lee Smith has assumed the challenging task of revising and maintaining our website. As we all know, Marcia insists on the best work product. If you have ideas or suggestions for the website, please let Marcia and me know.

We are not measured by our effort but by our success. Our effort has been monumental. Our success to this point has been good, but not yet complete. In addition to several project specific advances, probably our greatest achievement thus far is the uniting of leadership and citizenry of Eastern North Carolina for common good.

The journey to success has begun, but must be diligently pursued.

Thank you to all of you who have brought us this far. Let's keep it going.