



# US 70 Corridor Commission

## DIRECTOR'S REPORT FOR MONTHS OF NOVEMBER & DECEMBER, 2014 M. DURWOOD STEPHENSON, DIRECTOR

The year of 2014 has come to an end and many of us are now in the process of reflecting upon the last twelve (12) months formulating New Year's resolutions for the coming year. In customary fashion this time of year brings analysis, review and predictions as to what next year will bring to North Carolina and specifically to the agenda of the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission.

I hope this report will provide some informative reading during the lull between Christmas and New Year's Eve while continuing to provide a succinct, intelligent report of pertinent transportation issues impacting Eastern North Carolina.

The year of 2014 brought us the good, the bad and the ugly to plagiarize from a 1960's Clint Eastwood movie.

In the secular world the good news was minimal; an improving economy; lower unemployment; and in recent weeks, a record rising stock market. The absurdity of the Ice Bucket Challenge became a force for good as millions of people clicked "selfies" of themselves getting doused with ice water to raise more than \$ 200 million for research seeking a cure of Lou Gehrig's disease commonly identified as ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis).

The mysterious disappearance of a Malaysian passenger plane without a trace is definitely the "bad" category and surprising with all of the tools of technology and science available.

The birth and horrors of ISIS darkened history in 2014 elevating the level of the brutality of opposing religious ideologues.

In the world of pop culture and make believe, Elsa, the ice princess of the movie **FROZEN**, surpassed the long-time top selling toy in America for decades, the doll icon marketed as Barbie.

Abandoning the Year in Review of headline news with its pleasant and not so pleasant reminders, we turn our focus to the travails, hopes and dreams for Eastern North Carolina.

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Director

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As we reminisce about 2014 as a successful year, not only for our achievements, but also for a continuing and emerging regionally focused agenda, a self-assessment reflects how well we have done with specific project achievements as noted in October report.

The National economy continues to improve, but at the same time economic rebound has not been consistent across the country nor within the borders of our own State.

For the past several years the suggested dramatic impacts of the widening of the Panama Canal have been touted citing changing patterns of the movement of goods to and from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. Many ports on the East Coast are working on plans to deepen harbors to accommodate the larger ships that will soon be passing through the Panama Canal. Most logistical experts cite difficulties in serving large container ships at our Wilmington and Morehead City ports. It is incumbent upon North Carolina to provide the infrastructure to become the best possible “niche” port on the East Coast by improving rail and truck access. Not all goods will be shipped by large cargo carriers.

Norfolk Southern in December completed a \$ 92 million intermodal rail freight yard at Charlotte Douglas International Airport in Charlotte planning to link the facility to the port at Charleston as a large container deep water port. We wish them success, but projections by Norfolk Southern do not predict a huge increase in rail traffic.

At the other end of our State, efforts are underway to link Eastern commerce to a planned large cargo deep water port at Norfolk.

Certainly we cannot expect nor do we anticipate infrastructure improvements of the magnitude of those at Charlotte, it is however our hope to attract some dollars for infrastructure to enhance and improve our “niche” ports.

On November 18, the N.C. Chamber hosted a meeting to discuss developing a strategy to promote economic growth by improving infrastructure compatible with population growth during a period of revenue decline.

General Trogdon, a Transportation advocate presented: **North Carolina’s Revenue Challenge and What the Future Holds.**

Representative Bill Brawley, NC House – Chairman of Finance Committee, Chairman of Transportation Committee, Vice-Chairman of Commerce and Job Development Committee; and Representative John Torbett, NC House – Chairman of Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee, Chairman of Transportation Appropriations, Vice-Chairman of Commerce and Job Development; were present to lead discussions on future transportation funding options.

The Coalition for a Prosperous Future – Transportation and Infrastructure convened the group and are asking for all economic interests and partners to send letters to General

Assembly members encouraging their support for new funding sources for transportation and infrastructure in the upcoming session (January 14) of General Assembly. Although the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission is not an official member of the Coalition, I suggest that our directors and partners join in writing letters to their respective House and Senate members encouraging their focus and support for transportation funding.

I will provide suggested letters at February Corridor Commission meeting. If you need earlier, please advise and I will email a suggested letter for your use.

As previously noted the James City U.S. 70 Improvements Project was among the highest scoring projects in Eastern North Carolina under the new STIP funding formula. The recent history of planning and unfavorable community response leaves us without a project to be funded for now. In view of the history and the favorable funding opportunities, NCDOT has decided to scrap all previous plans. With the support of local County Commissioners, the process has begun anew with a new project consultant. Three Oaks Engineering, Durham, North Carolina has been selected as project consultant. Craig Young, a former DOT employee and principal of Three Oaks Engineering will be the Project Manager. We have already commenced discussions, and are planning a public relations and project planning strategy. Charles Cox, Project Engineer, Eastern Project Development Group, NCDOT will be the NCDOT Project Oversight Co-ordinator.

The Havelock Bypass has continued to experience a series of project delays, primarily environmental issues. A resolution appears to be near as local officials and the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission have begun an effort to encourage the resolution of pending issues. A series of Resolutions of Support have been enacted with several additional Resolutions anticipated. This is a project of considerable interest to local military interests, local elected officials and potential for a large economic development opportunity.

One of the original project priorities of Corridor Commission and RPO/MPO coalition was the SW Greenville Bypass. The \$ 250 million 12.4 mile project is scheduled to begin construction next year. A new project on the improvement plan is connecting the Felix Harvey Parkway with Highway 11 in Lenoir County. The 4 mile project will create a northern loop around Kinston. This is a project we should make every effort to expedite.

On December 8, N.C. Representative Mike Speciale joined BOT member Hugh Overholt; John Rouse, DOT Division Engineer; Marc Finlayson; citizen advocate, Don Black and me for lunch in New Bern. I was encouraged by Representative Speciale's remarks indicating General Assembly leadership says transportation funding will be one of the top five issues in upcoming session. As noted earlier, we must continue to promote that agenda. No one has more influence with your respective representative than you. Stay in touch locally.

The Carteret County Chamber of Commerce has just released their 2015 Legislative Agenda citing "transportation is the backbone of a region's economic vitality." This is a very proactive organization under the direction of President Mike Wagoner. They are also

encouraging their membership to be vocal with General Assembly in promoting transportation and infrastructure. You may recall this is the group that made the Coast Guard Commander cry “uncle” in their pursuit of permits for Gallant’s Channel Bridge. Calls, letters and emails are effective.

On January 6, 2015 Congress reconvenes with many new elected leaders. It is our duty and task to inform and educate those leaders of our priorities and objectives that will prove beneficial to our region.

A recent report from **60 MINUTES**, told a despairing story of the precocious state of infrastructure in America. The last major Transportation bill passed by Congress was in 1997 – nearly 18 years ago. In his last official report, former U.S. DOT Secretary Ray LaHood stated one (1) out of every nine (9) bridges in the United States is structurally deficient – in other words – unsafe. That is more than 70,000 bridges.

On the National front and considerable local interest, Congressman David Rouzer, a first term House member, has been appointed to the House Transportation Committee. I am meeting with Congressman Rouzer and feel certain he is going to join Congressman Jones, Holding and Butterfield as a co-sponsor of HR 5561.

We are also working to assure companion legislation is introduced in initial session of United States Senate. It may become necessary to request the assistance of each of you and our military allies for passage of Military Corridor Transportation Improvement Act of 2014.

The National and State focus on transportation and infrastructure presents an opportunity for a successful 2015 in advancing transportation and infrastructure in our State and specifically in Eastern North Carolina. Infrastructure (transportation) is the single most important commodity in commerce; it provides the highest potential for developing and expanding commerce. With renewed focus, we could see something profoundly different take shape in the year ahead, and it should mean good news for our region.

Governor McCrory continues to sing our favorite “hymn”: “The major metropolitan areas are growing and enjoying economic revival while rural areas are in decline. Our rural towns are struggling.” In a more recent appearance at N.C. Electric Co-ops, Governor McCrory continued the theme “Our vision for helping rural areas is through connectivity.”

If 2014 defined itself around change, 2015 must be the year of adaption and adjustment. Hopefully we learned from our mis-steps at last STIP funding and can play smarter the next round. Every RPO/MPO must re-examine our methodologies and scoring priorities.

As Alex Rickard so aptly stated, “the most important road to your County may not be in your County.”

A popular country song says: “It is a brand new day we learn to dance as we go.”

The North Carolina General Assembly will soon follow Congress into session and will assemble in Raleigh on January 14. It is obvious transportation funding is on their agenda as is the declining plight of rural North Carolina. It is an opportune time to press the economic future of rural North Carolina. The unlevel playing field is gaining attention. Senate Majority Leader, Harry Brown is talking about shifting local tax revenues to help rural counties. Investments in rural North Carolina will only make our State stronger. Perhaps it is an idea whose time has come.

It is our task and duty to encourage that message and offer strong support to those brave leaders advocating for a whole State.

A wise philosopher once said – constant dripping will wear away a stone. We must continue to be persistent and insistent in eroding the stone of past neglect.