



US 70 Corridor Commission

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

The year is seventy-five percent completed. It seems as if it just began. The ninth month of the year is a time of transition; the ending of summer and the beginning of autumn. Although we generally label September as fall, it is actually among the warmest months of the year here in the south. It has been especially true this year with an unusually mild summer. The golden haze of harvest has metamorphosed into a sea of brightly colored leaves strewn across the landscape. Like September, the year has been a period of transition for the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission. We are adjusting to new policies, new faces, fresh ideas and joining the chorus for more jobs and expanded commerce. The General Assembly continues to monitor the implementation of the Strategic Mobility Formula. At a recent meeting of The Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee, legislators expressed concern on two issues of the plan as recommended by NCDOT.

- Local priorities are 50 per cent of funding scores. DOT's plan delegates half of the local score to be provided by Division Engineer with remainder 50% to local officials MPO's/RPO's.
- Legislators also expressed concern about the share of dollars to be set aside for non-highway projects.

The project scoring allotment between Division Engineers and local RPO's/MPO's, elected officials and local Transportation Planning leaders is not an issue in our region. We can work with scoring plan because our Division Engineers are locally centered and in concert with local officials on project priorities.

As evidenced by comments at Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee, there is no consensus on balance between highway and non-highway funding. The Corridor Commission will leave that issue for each local jurisdiction to monitor and lobby according to each community's preference. Like the legislators, the communities in our region have varying opinions on this issue and each should discuss with their respective legislators promoting local opinions and values.

In addition to a transitioning and adjustment to HB 817 establishing the Strategic Mobility Funding, it is incumbent upon us to acquaint ourselves with Senate Bill 127 that reorganizes the N.C. Department of Commerce, its policies, procedures and operations.

The stated mission of the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission is to promote a freeway along the 135 mile U.S. 70 Corridor from I-40 in Wake County to the port at Morehead City. The membership of the Corridor developed this vision with a belief that unimpeded transportation infrastructure can and will promote economic opportunities throughout the heart of Eastern North Carolina.

Although the freeway corridor is the identified priority, the ultimate goal and purpose is the expansion of economic growth and development combined with the creation of more and better quality employment opportunities.

A review of deliberations and work product of Corridor Commission during the past 3 ½ years reveals a broad spectrum agenda that exceeds a single purpose highway improvement.

As we are constantly reminded by reality and statistics, Eastern North Carolina continues to lose population because the region does not offer opportunity. It is our belief transportation infrastructure is a key component for economic growth and the creation of employment opportunities. In recent months we have witnessed new customers for both ports. This new growth will obviously impact the Ports, but it will also provide a sustained economic engine for trucking, rail and forestry. Each of the partners in these ventures will expand employment opportunities. Studies dating back to 1983 have suggested a variety of small business enterprises creates a more diverse economy with a range of job skills and opportunities for our population.

Historically employment growth in more rural settings have tended to be medium to large operations that are headquartered outside the region and are, for the most part, a branch of a larger group. These medium to large employers are not significant "jobs multipliers" as is the case with smaller, local businesses. Rural N.C. has enjoyed high employment growth from larger system operations in the past and are now suffering high unemployment resulting from the loss of these mega employment operations. In rural communities the loss of a large employer devastates an isolated community with little or no opportunity to recover for extended periods. Our landscapes, unfortunately, are littered with large vacant buildings with few opportunities to retrofit for emerging businesses.

The six counties (Johnston, Wayne, Lenoir, Craven, Jones & Carteret) served by U.S. 70 Highway continue to struggle economically with unemployment as of August, 2013 ranging from 8% in Johnston County to 9.8% in Craven County.

Unemployment August, 2013

Johnston	-	8.0 %
Carteret	-	8.4 %
Jones	-	8.8 %
Wayne	-	9.0 %
Lenoir	-	9.7 %
Craven	-	9.8 %

The obvious conclusion from these numbers is the absolute necessity of continuing our multi-level agenda, addressing all pertinent factors that expands economic growth; an adequate physical infrastructure; a capable, well-trained workforce and/or capacity for training; a favorable business climate; access to capital markets; and a regional "big-picture" plan.

For the past 3 ½ years we have emphasized priority for regional connectivity and accessibility for our highways, streets, roads, bridges, ports and rail.

As we are all aware, road building and infrastructure expansions and additions are long-term investments. Our 30-second attention span does not serve us well in pursuit of multi-year projects that struggle for public consensus and scarce funds. For too long we have failed to stay on course with a long-term strategy to equip our region for emerging, evolving economy that is now global in scope.

Unfortunately our future is happening now; the plans we formulate and promote today will determine our tomorrow. Over the past several years, many businesses have grown and prospered in the new global economy. North Carolina ranks tenth nationally in employment supported by direct investment from foreign companies. Foreign-owned companies now employ more than 250,000 people, but too few of those foreign employers are located in Eastern North Carolina.

Our failure to lure foreign investments is a conversation we must initiate. Foreign investment provides a double opportunity; U.S. based operations employing local workers and export opportunities for goods manufactured or grown locally that may also lead to expansion into foreign markets.

According to N.C. Department of Commerce, more than 1,000 companies in the greater Charlotte region have international ownership. As North Carolinians, we are pleased with Charlotte's success, but as proponents of Eastern North Carolina, we yearn for a share of that global market. The big question is why we in Eastern North Carolina have failed to capture a significant segment of the foreign market. A propitious work force with a work ethic equal to any, coupled with a community college work-force training system are assets favored by all industry site selection operatives and should be an advantage for our region. We now have broadband capacity throughout the region with a good supply of clean water and relatively inexpensive land in large quantities. Although we have roads, ports and rail; we do not have

connectivity between major transportation routes and efficient ties to our ports and rail. This is an issue we must address and have been addressing for the past several years. Although the path is long and hard, we must continue with renewed effort and perseverance.

A brief overview of current projects reflects progress in moving forward with regional projects that prove connectivity and travel efficiency.

Securing permits from U.S. Coast Guard for Gallants Channel Bridge have become more urgent.

N.C. DOT has now submitted last navigational traffic study as requested by U.S. Coast Guard. The report provides data driven proof that an overwhelming majority of vessels (93%+) utilizing this route can safely pass under the proposed fixed-span 65-foot vertical clearance bridge. Funds to award contracts for construction of this long-awaited bridge are now available. The new funding formula may impact those funds if contracts are not awarded prior to July, 2015. Quotidienne diligence is a must if the bridge as designed is to be proceeding in 2014.

The Jacksonville MPO adopted a Resolution Supporting Extension of NC 24 to Jacksonville at the suggestion of Anthony Prinz. A copy of the Resolution is attached. The Resolution will be presented to Eastern North Carolina Coalition with approval anticipated.

On September 4, Rob Hanson and his staff provided updates on current U.S. 70 Corridor funded bypasses and corridor upgrades at N.C. BOT Committee meeting. A copy of the report is available upon request. A few highlights of the meeting that are significant and worthy of re-emphasis:

- **Gallants Channel Bridge**: Edith Peters, RS&H Project Consultant provided a detailed analysis of arguments offered by current project opponents. D.O.T. Project Managers Charles Cox and Rekho Patel also provided data supporting 65-foot, fixed-span bridge. If you have doubts about the appropriate design for this bridge, I encourage you to review Charlie's presentation. A copy is available upon request.
- **Havelock Bypass**: Corridor 3 has been selected as preferred route. As all are aware, the presence of woodpecker nests has delayed the project. A new count has now been completed with Concurrence Point 4A (Avoidance & Minimization Revisited) planned for late 2013. A final EIS is planned for early 2014 with Record of Decision scheduled for mid 2014. Construction is now scheduled for FY 2016. Land exchanges between DOT and Forest Service may prove difficult and could delay planned schedule.

- **U.S. 70 Improvements:**
 - **Wilson's Mills:** Natural Resources Technical Report (NRTR) completed and being reviewed. Design underway, to be completed in fall, 2013. Upon completion of design meeting will be held to determine if NEPA/404 Merger process will be necessary. Planning only funded.
 - **Pine Level:** Fully funded. ROW acquisition underway. Construction planned for February, 2015.

In a recent report released by American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) North Carolina's roads have improved and are currently sporting a solid "C" for roads. The report cites recently completed highway projects led by public private toll road in Wake County with other significant projects under construction. It is anticipated road conditions will continue to improve with these new projects.

We are hopeful and optimistic Eastern North Carolina will share funding for needed improvements. Our major highway concerns in the East are of statewide and regional significance which should enhance funding opportunities under the new Strategic Mobility Funding formula.

Steve Keen, Chairman Wayne County Commissioners, has been appointed to a national transportation steering committee, an arm of the National Association of Counties (NACO). Congrats to Commissioner Keen and trust he is able to develop supportive partners for our quest for Interstate designation which requires Congressional approval.

NCDOT Secretary Tony Tata proclaimed a historic day for North Carolina on September 16 with a ruling by Federal Judge Louise Flanagan clearing the way for a new parallel bridge over the Oregon Inlet. Governor McCrory gave due praise for the achievement. "I'm proud of the hard work and collaboration that NCDOT and multiple state and federal agencies and local leaders have done to protect this vital way," said Governor McCrory. The Bonner Bridge rated as 1, the lowest possible ranking for a bridge has been a great concern for area residents and DOT engineers. Not only is it unsafe, but it is also a maintenance nightmare. DOT has spent more than \$ 56 million in repairs in recent years on the 50 year-old bridge. Additional repairs will be required before the bridge can be replaced.

On September 16, the U.S. 70 Economic Impact and I795 Study Steering Committee met with project Consultants, Paula Dowell, Cambridge Systematics and Rocky Lane, Sanford-Holshouser Development Group for discussions on status of study and particulars of study objectives and intended end results. Presentation included:

Study Focus:

- Message – What is important to region
- Direct User Impacts
- Business Competitiveness
- Economic Impacts
 - Build No-Build
 - Positive Impacts
 - Negative Impacts

Another meeting of the Economic Impact Steering Committee is tentatively scheduled for October. I encourage steering committee members to continue discussions with local leadership and attend regional group discussions in your respective areas.

This is an important study and deserves careful study, analysis and input from all of us.



Jacksonville Urban Area
Metropolitan Planning Organization

**RESOLUTION SUPPORTING EXTENSION OF
NC 241 TO JACKSONVILLE**

A motion was made by TAC Member Lowell Mudgett and seconded by TAC Member Bob Warden for the adoption of the following resolution, and upon being put to a vote was duly adopted.

WHEREAS, the Transportation Advisory Committee has considered a proposal to extend NC 241 from its current terminus in Beulaville to NC 24 (Lejeune Boulevard) in Jacksonville; and

WHEREAS, the extension is proposed to run concurrently with NC 24 from Beulaville to Richlands departing from NC 24 along Gum Branch Road/Bell Fork Road (SR 1308) to Jacksonville, terminating at NC 24 near Camp Lejeune; and

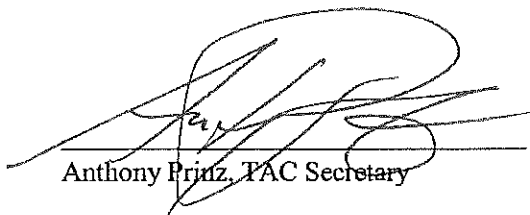
WHEREAS, the extension of NC 241 will enable Gum Branch Road/Bell Fork Road (SR 1308) to be eligible for Regional capital improvement funds and Primary Route maintenance funds allowing the facility to keep pace with increasing regional travel demand; and

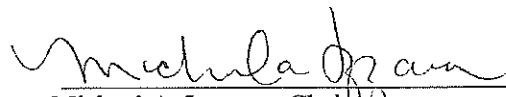
WHEREAS, the extension of NC 241 would provide a designated alternate route to US 258 for accessing Interstates 95 and 795 from Jacksonville, particularly given the close proximity of the new route to the future Camp Lejeune Main Gate; and

WHEREAS, the 2012 AADT's on Gum Branch Road/Bell Fork Road range from 8,000 in Richlands to 28,000 in Jacksonville, reflecting a higher-order level of mobility, commensurate with a Regional facility; and

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Jacksonville Urban Area Metropolitan Planning Organization Transportation Advisory Committee formally requests that the NC Department of Transportation consider extending NC 241 from Beulaville to Jacksonville along the proposed route.

Adopted by the Transportation Advisory Committee on the 29th day of August, 2013.


Anthony Prinz, TAC Secretary


Michael A. Lazzara, Chairman