



US 70 Corridor Commission

DIRECTOR'S REPORT FOR MONTH OF DECEMBER, 2011 M. DURWOOD STEPHENSON, DIRECTOR

As we bid farewell to the year of 2011, we do so with mixed emotions. No one could have forecast the epic natural disasters that created havoc throughout the world and the continuing gloomy prospects for an economic upturn remains a primary concern for all of us. In 2011 the U.S. was hit by 12 weather-related events that cost at least \$ 1 billion each.

Despite unfavorable climatic and economic conditions globally and within our own State, there is reason for optimism in Eastern North Carolina. The Corridor Commission has enjoyed a year of great progress and has developed a vision for the future of Eastern North Carolina with a roadmap to achieve the vision we share.

To look ahead, we must first look back. Approximately five years ago, visionary leaders throughout Eastern North Carolina recognized the failure of our region to spur economic growth. In their wisdom and with foresight they identified the absence of adequate transportation and the necessity of regional planning and co-operation among regional partners to develop and achieve a new vision for Eastern North Carolina.

The committed group of leaders engaged the services of Kimley-Horn and Associates to assist in developing a master plan for improving transportation in the region. The plan developed is multi-faceted including a vast array of options and devices including zoning, planning, regulating access, enacting ordinances to facilitate mobility and minimize crashes. But the primary focus and centerpiece of the vision plan is to establish a freeway corridor along the main street of commerce of Eastern North Carolina, strategic highway corridor U.S. 70.

A brief evaluation of the progress and status of the conversions of U.S. 70 highway to freeway status serves as a reminder of achievements thus far while focusing on the challenges that remain before us. As we travel U.S. 70 beginning at the genesis of our vision project at intersection with I-40 in Wake County, it is obvious much progress has been made, but many challenges remain. The first project along the route is the Clayton Bypass, which has been completed. Continuing our journey eastward, the next freeway obstacle is at-grade crossings and traffic signals at Wilson's Mills. For the past several months, NCDOT has been involved with public information workshops and discussions with local elected officials and interested citizens. NCDOT provided several options for consideration. The Wilson's Mills Town Board

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under the direction of Planning Director, Fleta Byrd, established a procedure for allowing the citizens to vote on preferred alternatives. However, the preferred option as voted by the local citizens is contingent upon normal DOT policies and procedures that must evaluate all factors including environmental impacts and other merger process considerations. That process is now underway. Although there are some funds committed to this project, currently available funds are insufficient to provide two interchanges as preferred by citizens. DOT and the Corridor Commission are committed to this project and funding will be found; however, there are a series of evaluations and assessments that must be completed before a construction schedule can be determined.

Median closures and interchanges at Pine Level have been a source of some controversy and years of discussions and public hearings. At long last, best alternatives have been selected and funding is available. A construction schedule is being finalized.

After diligent scrutiny and numerous review and negotiations, improvements along U.S. 70 in Princeton have been agreed upon by local Princeton officials and the Princeton U.S. 70 projects are awaiting funding.

The next major U.S. 70 freeway project along our route eastward is the Goldsboro Bypass. Approximately one year ago, the Goldsboro Bypass was scheduled for completion in year 2035. The elected officials and citizens of Wayne County and the Town of Goldsboro united behind a best available route. With innovative and "out of box" thinking by Bobby Lewis, the Goldsboro Bypass schedule has been escalated by approximately 20 years. This speaks volumes about the importance of co-operation and common support for a specific project.

Following years of dormancy, the Kinston bypass is now on the fast track for route selection and a Record of Decision (ROD) by year 2015, hopefully. Rob Hanson and Project Manager Mark Pierce and all of the support staff have skillfully and successfully guided this project through initial steps of Merger Process. We are indebted to them for their extra special efforts. A series of public information workshops is scheduled to begin on March 6. These workshops should aid in reducing the number of potential bypass routes. Assuming all goes according to plan, we are hopeful a Record of Decision (ROD) will be selected in 2015. The current schedule is for right-of-way acquisition to begin in 2020. We are hopeful this schedule can be accelerated.

The Havelock Bypass is fully funded for right of way acquisition and construction. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement was approved in September followed by a Public Hearing on December 6, 2011. The final Environmental Impact Statement is anticipated for mid 2013 with a final Record of Decision in 2013. Construction is scheduled for 2015. The Southern Environmental Law Center recently submitted comments in response to Draft EIS. NCDOT Staff is reviewing comments and preparing appropriate response.

James City presents special challenges. It is highly congested with extreme crash rates, but a bypass route is subject to numerous environmental constraints. Kimley-Horn and Associates has provided a preliminary plan worthy of consideration. A Feasibility Study was just recently completed with significant scrutiny and discussion to be conducted before a Freeway can be offered for local consideration.

There are a large number of smaller projects that are important to the mission and vision of the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission.

1. Slocum Gate Improvements consists of a flyover on existing U.S. 70 at Slocum Gate. This project is important and supported by the military. Funds are available for planning and environmental studies only. The Feasibility Study has been completed and the military continues to express strong support for this project.
2. Gallant's Channel Bridge replacement. After much debate and public comment, a 65-foot fixed bridge has been selected and is currently being designed. Permitting by USCG is anticipated in February, 2012 with construction let to follow quickly. The Department of Commerce prepared an Economic analysis supporting the 65-foot fixed bridge decision.
3. Conversion of existing U.S. 70 Skinners Bypass intersection to an interchange. Feasibility Study is complete.
4. Section A of Harvey Parkway is now under construction and we are hopeful final completion can be accelerated.

There are countless other smaller projects that will significantly impact Eastern North Carolina. Although the identifying of major specific projects with current status of each is important for our analysis and review, we must acknowledge the importance of a unified region. In an unprecedented action, seven RPO's and MPO's came together as one and agreed on project priorities. In my opinion it is among the most notable achievements of the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission.

In an effort to improve the status and influence of RPO's in the merger process, signature status was requested and has been approved.

DOT is now accepting requests for projects for mobility funding. The criteria for project selection has been defined. It is incumbent upon us to identify projects in our region that may qualify.

Eastern North Carolina is blessed with a vast array of diverse assets that blend well together. The fertile lands provide us with an agriculture economy that leads the region. Agriculture blends well with the open space requirements of the military which ranks second

economically in the region and continues to be a growing source for services and employment opportunities. Military operations in Eastern North Carolina currently have an economic impact of approximately \$ 9 billion annually. With decreasing military spending anticipated 2014 budget, BRAC may be looming in our future as soon as 2013. It is imperative that we address the transportation needs and concerns of our military friends in the region. The scenic beauty and our vast coastline bring many visitors to us and many elect to make the area their retirement home. Tourism dollars are significant and until recent economic downturn were growing rapidly.

The Global Transpark is another asset with great opportunities for growth. We have two major rail lines, CSX and Norfolk southern in concert with our own North Carolina Railroad and several small lines offer rail service, but without a major customer base east of Goldsboro rail service is not currently as competitive in pricing as desired. We have an obligation to assist in developing rail customers as we promote growing commerce in Eastern North Carolina. The Eastern Region also has two seaports that are under-utilized. Truck and rail access to our ports is lacking.

Our assets are many and offer a variety of opportunities, but multi-modal transportation is an obstacle to expanding and growing our assets. A major freeway (U.S. 70) with arterial road improvements are absolutely necessary to the future of Eastern North Carolina.

The U.S. 17 Commission and the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission have identified transportation deficiencies and have developed an evolving vision for improving mobility, safety and regional connectivity. The process is underway and our leaders are committed. Transportation and road building are long and arduous processes that require constant diligence, long range planning and unending commitments to stay the course.

We have been eagerly awaiting some important studies: Logistics, Seven Portals and Port Study. Originally the reports were scheduled for release by year-end. The studies are now scheduled for release in late March, 2012. As I reported in last month's report, Norris Tolson, Charlie Diehl and I have voiced concerns about the lack of relevant information in the Eastern Region Section of Seven Portals Study. Lt. Governor Dalton has appropriately addressed many of the issues we raised in his preface to Logistics Study. We are grateful to Lt. Governor Dalton and Seth Palmer for their foresight and inclusion of pertinent data.

The most extensive and comprehensive analysis of the Seven Portals Study was recently completed by Eastern Region Director, John Chaffee. Mr. Chaffee has conducted a line-by-line evaluation and review of the draft study. His analysis is thorough and corrects errors and/or misinformation. He also adds factual data that should be included to substantiate the accuracy of his comments. We are grateful for this time-consuming task and are hopeful, the final draft will reflect his findings.

I believe we have the team to achieve the vision as created by the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission and feel we have made great strides in moving forward with our plan. I am deeply

grateful for the support and sustained effort provided by our Board of Transportation members, the staff and leadership at NCDOT, our elected officials and every member of the U.S. 70 Corridor Commission.

To plagiarize the comments of Lee Smith to General Trogdon, Bobby Lewis, John Rouse and Neil Lassiter: "Without your commitment to the 70 Corridor, we would not be where we are today. Your advice, guidance and expertise is the reason we are successful. I know we have a long way to go from Raleigh to the Ports, but I know it can happen because of folks like you."

Well said Lee and the same applies to so many of you that continue to support the "One Voice, One Vision" agenda.

As we begin a new year, we should be encouraged by recent achievements and determined by a belief that we can create a better future for Eastern North Carolina.

Thank you everyone!