

Corridor K and Common Sense

Executive Summary

US Route 64 through the Ocoee Gorge in Tennessee and US 74 through the Nantahala Gorge in North Carolina have provided an alternate route from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Asheville, NC for many years. It has been considered a scenic route that allows intimate and beautiful views of the Ocoee and Nantahala Rivers and of the wilderness and natural areas enveloping this splendidly unique area of the South. With increasing population in the area, it deserves improvement. We support that effort.

What is not responsible is to endorse the proposal to build an intrusive four-lane highway commonly referred to as "Corridor K" through the area. Corridor K would require destructive road building through two highly valued National Forests: the Cherokee National Forest and the Nantahala National Forest. These forests are critical to wildlife and plant habitat and to good water quality. In addition the road construction would destroy picturesque mountain communities as well as significant historic and cultural sites and the mountain views that draw many people to visit these areas in the first place. The construction of such a road is inconsistent with common sense.

Realities

1. Conceived 44 years ago by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the concept of building a four lane corridor through this area of Appalachia to facilitate commerce among key southeastern cities and ports has since been rendered obsolete by the completion of the Eisenhower Interstate System. Efficient transportation is readily accomplished between Chattanooga and Asheville via I-40, to Atlanta by I-75, and to eastern port cities via I-20 and I-16 with no appreciable difference in time based on this proposed roadway.
2. This road corridor would be massively destructive to the valuable natural and historic assets of the region. Currently these assets generate millions of dollars in annual recreational revenue to the mountainous region. Important recreation resources including the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, the Benton MacKaye Trail, numerous trout streams and thousands of acres of hunting habitat would be directly impacted. The surrounding forests are delicately-balanced sanctuaries for threatened plant and animal species which would also be impacted by such an environmentally devastating roadway.
3. The U.S. road transportation system has been based on cheap oil. Continuously soaring fuel prices and a diminished tax base have already resulted in a decline in trucking, while the benefits of railway traffic, already in place, are increasing substantially.
4. Early construction cost estimates for the Tennessee section of Corridor K approach \$2 billion with the State of Tennessee responsible for up to \$500 million. Completing the North Carolina sections is likely to be equally costly. With budget constraints impacting both the Tennessee and North Carolina Departments of Transportation, and with the pressing need for existing infrastructure repair and maintenance, it is difficult to justify the priority of completing an unnecessary and destructive highway that should have been reevaluated decades ago.

Closing Remarks

The proposal to build an intrusive, environmentally destructive, four-lane road through the rugged terrain and forests of the pristine mountain refuge of Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee would be a major departure from common sense. It would be a disgraceful waste of taxpayers' dollars during a historic period of economic decline. Existing alternative roadways and railways offer excellent routing for both domestic and commercial transportation. The proposed four-lane roadway would be highly destructive to the valuable corridor through which it would intrude.

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