

# Road Project

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For more information visit: [www.corridor.k.org](http://www.corridor.k.org)

Below is a recent article discussing the economic tragedy of this road project:

Corridor K brings anywhere America right here to WNC By Brent Martin • Guest Columnist

When President John F. Kennedy formed a federal-state committee in 1963 known as the President's Appalachian Regional Commission, one out of every three people living in Appalachia was living below the poverty line. Millions of Appalachians were fleeing for work in other regions, and per capita income was 23 percent lower than the U.S. average.

One of the solutions proposed by the ARC was to build over 3,000 miles of roads into Appalachia, roads that would bring jobs, wealth and modernization. And the roads did come. The alphabet soup of highway projects that came out of the ARC are visible everywhere in Appalachia today -- Corridor B, for example, or more commonly known as Interstate 26, was completed in 2003 at a cost of \$250 million -- for the last nine miles of highway blasted through mountains from Asheville to Tennessee.

A small segment of Corridor K, which the ARC and NC DOT are working to complete, will come at a similar cost. Ten miles of Corridor K will come with a price tag of \$350 million of federal and state tax dollars to blast a road from the Stecoah community through the Nantahala National Forest to Robbinsville. The ostensible reason for building the road is that it will solve Graham County's problems of unemployment, poverty and isolation. These are serious problems, particularly since Graham's unemployment and poverty rates are higher than state averages. But will building a four-lane highway solve these problems? The NC DOT claims it will.

Specifically, the DOT claims that a new four-lane highway will attract businesses, make commuting to work out of the county faster

and easier, lure tourists who enjoy "reduced travel time and increased accessibility," and improve access to medical facilities. What the DOT does not acknowledge is that highway construction jobs bring only a temporary bump in local spending and that very few of those dollars would circulate locally. Large crews and specialized equipment skills required by such a large project will likely mean importing many contract workers. Small rural economies have small economic multipliers, so few of those dollars will remain in the local economy. Contract workers will send paychecks to their families back home, and likely travel there themselves during their time off. Since the increased spending is known to be temporary, new retail businesses are unlikely to invest in new or expanded local stores.

Even after the highway is finished, an interstate through an isolated rural area carries people out as well as in, and would likely encourage Graham County residents to do more of their shopping outside the local area.

Expanding highway capacity in hopes of attracting manufacturers takes a backward-looking view of both the U.S. economy as a whole and this region in particular. Manufacturing jobs have declined throughout North Carolina's western mountain counties, from 37 percent of the workforce in 1970 to 10 percent in 2007. It is not likely that a new four-lane highway will bring those jobs back, especially as fuel prices continue to climb over the coming decades.

Solid long-term economic development is based on the inherent strengths of an area. For Graham County, that includes a strong rural work ethic and unsurpassed wild natural surroundings. An interstate will not contribute to the former, and it will seriously damage the latter.

Jack Schultz, author of *Boom Town USA: The 7 Keys to Big Success in Small Towns*, documents the increasing popularity of small rural towns as the fastest growing economies in the nation. Increasingly, entrepreneurs are

moving to these places because of their natural beauty and small-town atmosphere, and they bring their businesses and their retirement incomes with them. Schultz names Highlands as one of the "Golden Eagles" - the top 100 "Agurbs" in the nation. Highlands' location is very similar to Robbinsville's: it's in a valley surrounded by Western North Carolina's beautiful mountains and is at a similar distance from interstate access. Clearly, an interstate is not necessary for economic success in this part of the state.

At the other end of the state, Tyrrell County is featured in another recent publication, *Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities*. The least populated of all North Carolina counties (Graham is 98th), Tyrrell County has chosen to turn its remoteness into a marketing advantage. The county bills itself as "unspoiled, uncrowded, uncomplicated," with attractions ranging from red wolves to the Scuppernong River nature trail. Per-capita personal income has risen by 11 percent (after adjusting for inflation) since the *Balancing Nature and Commerce* book was written, and Tyrrell County's unemployment rate now ranks 42nd in the state compared to Graham County's fourth (November, 2007 data).

According to the Graham County Chamber of Commerce web site, "Graham County, filled with Smoky Mountain adventures, is becoming better known every year. With a natural beauty still unspoiled by crowds, it is truly a rare find in today's world."

If Graham intends to keep it this way, the county had best ask the ARC to provide Graham with a cash alternative to this destructive highway, and invest instead in the long-term preservation of the goose that will hopefully continue to lay golden eggs for years to come. Strip malls, convenience stores, and chain restaurants that come with the type of highway DOT is proposing will only strangle the life out of it.

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Graham County

## Road Project Threatens Mountain Environment & Economy

As presently planned, a new, four-lane highway will soon cut through the most scenic and pristine section of the Stecoah Valley in Graham County, NC; it's a ten-mile long, \$378 million swath of destruction estimated to save insignificant travel time for interstate commerce. And this is the least expensive portion of an interstate road planned to run from Stecoah to Andrews, NC via Robbinsville.

The existing roadway between Robbinsville and Stecoah, NC (NC28 and NC143) can be improved, completing the regional corridor and taking commercial trucks out of the Nantahala Gorge. The DOT admits that our current roads will handle traffic adequately for at least 20 more years, and with supplemental shipping done by railroads, this model should be sufficient for many years more.

The proposed new highway is not only unnecessary, unwise, outmoded, and unaffordable; it squanders and depletes the limited funds

DOT, the media, and elected officials.

Your presence is crucial in changing the destructive direction of this project.

If you can not make the October 29 Public Hearing, please consider attending one of the following open houses and voicing your concerns.

OCTOBER 27, 2009 - 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm

Hospitality Room at the Ramsey Center, Western Carolina University

1601 Ramsey Center, Cullowhee

[www.wcu.edu/ramsey](http://www.wcu.edu/ramsey)

OCTOBER 28, 2009 - 3:00 pm to 7:00 pm

Stecoah Valley Center

121 Schoolhouse Road, Stecoah (outside Robbinsville)

[www.stecoahvalleycenter.com](http://www.stecoahvalleycenter.com)

If you can not attend any of