

## Forget highway boondoggles

It's still unclear how the new stimulus bill will be apportioned to the states, and how much of the infrastructure funding set aside in the final version of the bill will end up in each state's treasury. But it is clear that most state governments, including those in the South, already have compiled long lists of transportation projects for which they like stimulus funds, both for repairs and new highways.

The final version of the stimulus bill appears to reserve \$29 billion for highway projects, \$8.4 billion for new or improved transit projects, and \$8 billion for high-speed rail. These funds will be apportioned to the states based on a complex formula, and the amounts haven't yet been determined.

But as state and local officials contemplate their priorities for spending, common sense should rule. The basic rule should be that new highway investments should go first for roads and bridges that are heavily used and most in need of repair. None should go for new highways that would mainly extend and exacerbate sprawl and unwelcome development in rural areas that already are served reasonably well by existing roads.

In this region, one of the best examples of unnecessary highway spending is the proposed Corridor K. This boondoggle would cut through huge pristine tracts of the Cherokee National Forest to reroute traffic off Highway 64 from a point several miles east of Parksville Lake all the way to Ducktown.

This 20-mile Ocoee bypass road would cost an estimated \$1.5 billion to \$2.3 billion, a staggering sum for an unneeded alternate route around a few miles of a popular recreation area — the relatively short stretch of Highway 64 near rafting areas above Parksville Lake. Yet is strongly advocated by some officials, including Rep. Zach Wamp, as a way to improve safety for people who now drive the winding route along the popular Ocoee River.

The safety argument doesn't hold water. That stretch of highway has a lower-than-average traffic accident rate, and upgrades already are underway to improve safety further. It's more likely that the region's public officials want a slightly more direct, highspeed road to the Ducktown/Copper Hill area to promote easy access and potential growth.

The focus of new highway spending should be on far more critical needs. A report by the Southern Environmental Law Center reasonably advocates focus on "fix-it-first projects that put people to work quickly and that address the huge backlog of repairs needed for aging roads and bridges in the region."

The report cites a Federal Highway Administration study which has identified more than 22,000 structurally deficient or functionally obsolete roads and bridges in the six states of Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia.

There's plenty of useful rebuilding to be done that commuters certainly would value more highly than another massively destructive road project. Corridor K and roads like it shouldn't qualify as road building priorities in the first place. And they certainly shouldn't be on the list for stimulus spending.