

Interstate 73: Where we are now:

FHWA's Record of Decision completes the planning and environmental study process. Preliminary engineering and the design phase are the next steps.

In March 2007, The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) completed the I-73 environmental impact study process. At that time, FHWA issued the Record of Decision (ROD) for Interstate 73, thus completing the planning phase of the proposed 70-mile long interstate between Roanoke and the North Carolina line. A Record of Decision is the final step in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning process that includes public involvement and considers the possible environmental impacts of transportation projects. For this project, reaching a ROD represents 10 years of public input and environmental study on many different alternative alignments.

In October 2007, four plaintiffs, including Virginians for Appropriate Roads, filed a lawsuit against the FHWA, USDOT and VDOT seeking to prevent further development of the Interstate 73 project. This matter is scheduled to be heard in May 2009 in the U.S. District Court in Roanoke. Since the filing of this lawsuit, work on I-73 has been temporarily suspended pending the resolution of the lawsuit. To date, \$8.2 million has been spent on developing I-73 in Virginia.

In November 2007, the Henry County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution asking the CTB and VDOT to

“... re-open their consideration of a route for Interstate 73, and to incorporate the proposed Patriot Centre connector road and better access from the Martinsville Speedway and the Martinsville Industrial Park as part of that re-evaluation.”

On June 19, 2008, the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) responded by passing a resolution that stated, in part:

*“... **WHEREAS**, the Commonwealth Transportation Board desires that VDOT work with the Federal Highway Administration and determine an appropriate time when the request from the board of supervisors may be considered by VDOT and the Federal Highway Administration. **NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, by the Commonwealth Transportation Board that the Department of Transportation work with the Federal Highway Administration and take any action it deems appropriate without prejudicing or otherwise affecting the litigation, the federal funding, and the advancement of the project, to consider the request made by the Henry County Board of Supervisors and report the results of any study to the Commonwealth Transportation Board of further action of the Board. ”*

The CTB response to Henry County's resolution allows VDOT and the FHWA to take actions regarding the county's request in a manner that would not impact the ongoing litigation, federal funding for the project and our advancement of the project.

Additional CTB action and FHWA approval would be required to make any changes to the corridor alignment.

How we got here:

In 1991, Congress identified as a high priority the need for a north-south corridor from north of Detroit to near Charleston, S.C.

In 1995, the proposed corridor through Virginia was generally described as following the Route 460 corridor from West Virginia to I-81, then following I-81 to Roanoke, then turning south along the existing Route 220 corridor to Greensboro, N.C.

In 1997, the CTB authorized a Location Study for the portion of the I-73 corridor between Roanoke and the North Carolina border. This is the only portion of I-73 that has been funded for study. To begin the study, a statement of the project's Purpose and Need was developed. The Purpose and Need Statement is similar to the first chapter of a book. It states existing problems and identifies the needs of the existing transportation system. For I-73, the Purpose and Need Statement of the DEIS identifies these large national needs:

- The need for improved transportation facilities for goods movement, which links the port of Charleston, S.C., with Detroit and Sault Saint Marie, Mich.
- The need for an effective and efficient roadway, which facilitates interstate travel between Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, and North and South Carolina.
- The need for a safe and direct transportation link for business trucking between North Carolina's Piedmont Triangle and the Roanoke Valley's I-581 and I-81 corridors.
- The need for an interstate transportation facility to foster planned economic development between southwestern Virginia and the Piedmont Triad regions and between Virginia communities from the City of Roanoke to the North Carolina state line.
- Identify the location of a "high priority" link in the National Highway System.

The Purpose and Need also identified several more local concerns to be addressed in the proposed I-73 corridor thru Virginia:

- The high percentage of truck traffic on U.S. Route 220.
- The designation of U.S. 220 as a Surface Transportation Assistance Act (STAA) roadway that allows for oversized trucks on a roadway with identified sight distance problems.
- The high accident rates on U.S. Route 220 between Route 419 and the North Carolina border.
- Steep road grades on portions of U.S. Route 220.
- The numbers of crossovers with no turn lanes or with turn lanes in only one direction on U.S. Route 220, which increases the number of accidents.
- Access to the Blue Ridge Parkway on-ramps from the south and to other area historic and natural resources

- Reduce conflicts between local traffic and truck traffic in U.S. Route 220 and improve transportation safety in the U.S. Route 220 corridor between I-581 and North Carolina.
- Enhance goods movement by providing efficient transportation for truck traffic by separating existing and projected U.S. Route 220 truck volumes from local traffic.
- Improve transportation infrastructure between North Carolina's Piedmont Triad, Virginia's West Piedmont Planning District Commission (PDC) and Roanoke Valley Alleghany Regional Planning Commission.
- Support local economic initiatives and existing and planned business and industry.
- Enhance mobility and access through southwestern Virginia and the national high priority corridor.

In January 1998, during a series of public participation meetings, a draft Purpose and Need Statement (see below) was available at the meetings. Hundreds of people turned out to give their opinions on the possibility of a new interstate, as well as offer suggestions on where it should go, what it should be close to and what it should avoid.

The I-73 Study Team took this input and began to develop several options, or *alternatives*, for inclusion in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) being prepared for the project. Dozens of possible alternatives were identified. VDOT held another round of public participation meetings to show maps of the alternatives and gather citizens' input. Among the alternatives were several locations for building a new interstate, an alternative called Transportation System Management that consisted of lower cost improvements to existing Route 220, and an option not to build a new interstate called "no build."

In 2000, after the DEIS was completed, which documented each of the alternatives under consideration, VDOT held public hearings throughout the corridor so that the public could provide their comments on the DEIS and formally register their opinions about the I-73 project.

In May 2001, the CTB selected their preferred alignment for the corridor from I-81 south to the North Carolina state line and authorized the detailed environmental study of this alignment. At that time, I-73 overlapped I-581 in Roanoke and continued to Elm Avenue where it turned southwest over Windy Gap Mountain before entering Franklin County. Once in Franklin County, the location turned nearly due south to run roughly parallel to Route 220, passing to the east of Rocky Mount. I-73 briefly connected again with Route 220 in southern Franklin County before turning southeast to curve around the eastern side of Martinsville and then connects with Route 220 at the North Carolina line.

In June 2001, the CTB slightly altered the location for Interstate 73 in southern Franklin County and Henry County by choosing a more easterly route around Rocky Mount and Martinsville to limit the environmental impact and provide an easier project to design and build.

In 2002, The Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places determined that the "Southeast Roanoke Neighborhood" in Roanoke was eligible for historic designation. The selected alignment passed through this neighborhood and Federal regulations prohibit the development of federally funded projects through historic sites if other feasible alternatives exist, so the alignment had to be shifted to bypass this newly determined historic resource. Although the I-73 DEIS documented historic sites, at the time of its completion, officials with Virginia's Department of Historic Resources, FHWA and VDOT did not consider the Roanoke neighborhood historically significant. A local group challenged that opinion, and the issue was presented to the Keeper of the National Register for a final determination.

In 2004, VDOT held two citizen information meetings on options to alter the selected corridor to bypass the Southeast Roanoke Neighborhood, after these meetings, the CTB voted to alter the routing for I-73. The selected corridor in this area overlaps I-581 to Elm Avenue, then follows Route 220 through Roanoke and into southern Roanoke County before turning southeast following Route 687 into Franklin County, where it connects with the route previously selected.

In 2006, the detailed environmental study on the selected corridor was completed with the signing of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) by VDOT and the FHWA. The FEIS is a compilation of facts about preferred alignment for the new interstate. As a part of this process, VDOT received thousands of public comments about the potential corridor.

The FEIS is 1,039 pages, but this does not include the numerous other technical studies for air, noise, cultural resources and others that were also completed as part of the process.

The FEIS is prepared by FHWA and VDOT with consultation from the following agencies:

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- The National Park Service
- The U.S. Coast Guard