

Shenandoah Valley Network | Coalition for Smarter Growth
Rockingham Community Alliance for Preservation

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General Assembly Committee Votes against Bill to Improve I-81 According to Need

Bill Would Have Completed Spot Improvements and Increased Safety without Needless Spending or Damage to Communities

Northern Shenandoah Valley legislators and citizens groups were surprised and disappointed Wednesday when a bill calling for less costly, smaller scale options for I-81 was killed in a General Assembly committee. The measure had the support of I-81 corridor delegates from Augusta County north to Frederick County and more than a dozen statewide, regional and local groups.

The resolution was drafted in response to a proposed \$13.6 billion, 12 lane truck highway and other major highway expansion options, all funded by tolls on cars and trucks, being studied by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT). The resolution, introduced by freshman Del. Todd Gilbert (R-Woodstock), called on VDOT to focus on smaller scale improvements to the road and the potential of a rail project to divert through truck traffic.

“We were promoting a reasonable, affordable approach to address issues of safety and congestion on I-81, one that doesn’t demand tolls or asphalt throughout our valley. It was rejected out of hand,” said Kim Sandum of Harrisonburg, president of Rockingham Community Alliance for Preservation (CAP), who spoke in favor of HJ 143 at House Rules Committee meeting Wednesday.

“Our valley should be able to determine its own future,” Del. Steven Landes (R-Weyers Cave), a co-sponsor of the bill, told the committee. The committee voted eight to seven to table the measure. It cannot be revived in its current form this legislative session, although an identical version, SJ 165, survives in the Senate.

“Every taxpayer in Virginia lost out today,” said Stewart Schwartz, executive director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, an advocate of statewide transportation reform. “The measure would have saved us billions in road construction costs and made sure that road improvements don’t drag down the Shenandoah Valley economy or mar its celebrated historic landscape,” said Schwartz, who also testified for the bill.

The opposition was led by Del. Morgan Griffith (R-Salem) and House Transportation Committee Chairman Leo Wardrup (R-Virginia Beach). Speakers against the bill

included staff from VDOT, the McGuire Woods law firm representing STAR Solutions, the group proposing to build the truckway, and the Roanoke Chamber of Commerce. Road builder English Construction, a key principal in STAR Solutions, is based in nearby Salem.

Sandum said opponents distorted the intent of Del. Gilbert's resolution and the issues surrounding I-81. "They claimed there were no projects underway to improve I-81 before STAR Solutions proposed building the truckway, as part of the state's Public Private Transportation Act. That's just not true. "

VDOT identified \$400 million in improvements in 1998 and had already spent \$275 million by last year for better entrance and exit ramps in Bristol and Salem," Sandum said.

She added, "Opponents to Reasonable Solutions for I-81 keep telling us the road is dangerously unsafe. That's not true either." VDOT's Purpose and Need Statement for I-81, released last March, showed an accident rate just 57 percent of the average on Virginia interstates (160 accidents per 100 million miles traveled, versus 277 per 100 million miles). The VDOT study also indicated that only seven percent of northbound lanes, 10 percent of southbound lanes and less than one percent of entrance and exit ramps operate below standards for interstate highway congestion.

In response to the costly truckway and other major widening proposals, a host of local governments and groups has endorsed a six-point plan called Reasonable Solutions for the Future of I-81. Supporters include: Augusta, Rockingham, Shenandoah and Albemarle counties, four incorporated towns in Shenandoah County, the Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association, the Shenandoah Valley Travel Association, Civil War Preservation Trust, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Coalition for Smarter Growth, Scenic Virginia, Virginia Conservation Network, Valley Conservation Council and the Shenandoah Valley Network of citizens groups in the northern valley.

Reasonable Solutions for I-81

- 1) Complete spot improvements to I-81, such as climbing lanes and redesigned exits, which will improve safety and relieve congestion. Data should support the need and type of each improvement, many of which are identified in earlier VDOT studies.
- 2) Use the highway's median for improvements to limit the encroachment of the road on private property and to avoid further impacts on adjacent landowners, communities, farmland, battlefields and tourism.
- 3) Significantly step up law enforcement to improve safety.
- 4) Incorporate meaningful transit options for both urban and rural areas in road improvement plans. Coordinate with cities, local governments, major employers and universities.
- 5) Implement the rail component of a balanced transportation system to increase options for freight capacity, maintain economic competitiveness and avoid air quality and congestion problems as road use grows.

6) Provide funding for land acquisition to mitigate impacts of I-81 on cultural resources in the corridor, most notably battlefields.

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