



201 West Main Street, #14  
Charlottesville, VA 22902-5065  
(434) 977-4090  
FAX: (434) 977-1483  
SouthernEnvironment.org

September 18, 2006

The Honorable Timothy M. Kaine  
Patrick Henry Building, 3rd Floor  
1111 East Broad Street  
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Governor Kaine,

Based upon your remarks and numerous conversations with members of your Administration, we understand that you are in the process of defining your approach to improving the I-81 corridor. We are writing to share some of our thoughts on this critical issue prior to the presentations to the Commonwealth Transportation Board this Thursday. The CTB should not be asked to vote on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement in October to permit further discussion and development of your plan, and to ensure that the serious flaws in the DEIS are corrected before it is voted upon.

We share your concern about the need to address traffic and safety issues on I-81. But while highlighting the need for improvements to the corridor, the DEIS sometimes overstates those needs. As it demonstrates, the congestion and safety problems in the corridor are not uniform and no single solution can address them. Therefore, we urge you to reject the massive widening and one-size fits all highway widening proposed by STAR Solutions. Not only is such a proposal unwarranted, but it would carry an astronomical price tag, resulting in tremendous adverse impacts, and could only be funded through heavy tolls. In addition, VDOT proposals for a third lane in each direction for the entire length of the corridor – and a fourth lane each way in many places – appear to be beyond what is needed, given the nature of the problem and the mix of solutions that are available.

As you have stated, the pressing issue on I-81 is safety. The DEIS shows that the most serious safety problems are concentrated in a relatively small portion of I-81. We understand that the first element of your plan to address I-81 is to address safety problem areas, using the federal funds earmarked for I-81. We strongly support the emphasis on safety improvements, and urge you to ensure that these improvements are in fact targeted to address safety problems and that context-sensitive design is used to minimize the adverse impacts of these projects.

We also urge you to add a second element to your safety plan. One of the fundamental flaws of the DEIS is its failure to adequately analyze steps such as improved

law enforcement that does not involve new construction. The success of the safety corridor near Roanoke in reducing crashes highlights the effectiveness of these measures. We urge you to add increased law enforcement to the first prong of your strategy for addressing I-81, and to direct that the DEIS be revised or supplemented to improve consideration of this alternative and other Transportation System Management steps that can meet much of the need for this project but are largely ignored in the DEIS.

The other main issue on I-81 is capacity. Unfortunately, the analysis of capacity needs in the corridor is flawed, resulting in an inaccurate assessment of the need for improvements and making it difficult to identify the most effective solutions. Among other things, much more should be done to document and distinguish between the roles local traffic and through traffic play in causing congestion in the corridor. In addition, estimates of capacity needs are based on levels of service higher than required and the forecasts fail to consider the impact of volatile fuel prices. Further, the study fails to address your call to a better link between transportation and land use planning since it does not examine the impact of alternative land use assumptions on travel demand. All of these flaws should be corrected.

The DEIS also moves far too quickly to focus on Build Alternatives that would add a substantial amount of asphalt to the I-81 corridor. Inexplicably, the study shifts from concluding that no single alternative is capable of addressing the needs of the corridor to rejecting certain alternatives because they cannot provide a corridor-wide solution. Again, the DEIS must be revised before it is voted upon by the CTB.

We applaud your recent remarks suggesting that rail improvements should be an equally important prong for improving this corridor, and that rail in the corridor should be maximized, continuing a commitment to rail you expressed during your campaign. There is tremendous public support for rail improvements, and we believe that rail offers some of the most promising steps to address the increase in freight traffic that is a primary factor leading to needed improvements to the corridor. The DEIS should be revised to improve the consideration and call for rail improvements. Moreover, as you know, the DEIS fails to consider interstate rail improvements. We are pleased by the recent announcement that the study of interstate rail improvements called for in the bill you signed in May has now been fully funded, and believe that the DEIS should be revised or supplemented to consider this study.

The DEIS fails to study a number of other improvements we support, such as improving local street networks to provide alternatives to travel on I-81. In urban and urbanizing areas of the corridor, local traffic tends to play a much larger role in causing congestion, and improvements to local streets should be part of the solution for I-81. Yet the DEIS ignores this option, which is likely to cost less and be less destructive. Again, this fundamental flaw should be fixed.

Finally, the DEIS consistently underestimates the adverse impacts of the proposed Build Alternatives. Among other things, it underestimates diversion if tolls are imposed and the impacts on communities, congestion, and environmental quality this would cause.

For all of the build alternatives, it underestimates impacts on battlefields and other historic resources, it underestimates impacts on cultural resources, and it underestimates water quality and air quality impacts. Further, again contrary to your call for improving the link between transportation and land use planning, the analysis of the impacts of Build Alternatives on land use is cursory and flawed. In fact, this DEIS is a prime exhibit of the fundamental disconnect between transportation and land use that you have said must be addressed.

In short, the DEIS is not ready for prime time. It should be revised so that it presents a full picture of alternatives to the widening options and the impacts of the Build Alternatives. It should be revised to meet your call to improve the link between transportation and land use. It should be revised so that it does not rule out or relegate some of the effective potential solutions you have endorsed to the status of mere add-ons to the Build Alternatives. It should be revised to include a comprehensive solution combining rail, land use, local streets, law enforcement and transportation systems management, and targeted safety improvements. Until these flaws are corrected, the DEIS cannot satisfy its purpose of informing decision-makers and the public, and the CTB should not be asked to approve such a flawed document.

We appreciate your consideration of these comments. We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss these concerns in detail with the CTB at this week's meeting, and would, of course, be glad to discuss any of these matters with you and to provide additional information on any of these points.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trip Pollard', written over a horizontal line.

Trip Pollard  
Southern Environmental Law Center

Stewart Schwartz  
Coalition for Smarter Growth

Megan Gallagher  
Shenandoah Valley Network

cc: Members of the Commonwealth Transportation Board