



For Immediate Release

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Citizens Groups Join Shenandoah County To Block I-81 Tolls & Widening

A coalition of citizens groups in the northern Shenandoah Valley joined Shenandoah County in calling on Governor Tim Kaine and transportation officials to halt plans to toll and widen I-81 to eight lanes and to reconsider rail freight and other options to ease traffic and increase safety on the corridor.

"We applaud the Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors for their leadership on this issue," said Rosemary Wallinger of Mt. Jackson, president of the Shenandoah Forum group in the county. "We share their frustration with the state, which heard from thousands of residents opposed to tolls and in favor of rail at public hearings last year, yet continues to focus on costly and destructive highway widening," she added.

VDOT plans, identified in their I-81 Tier 1 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), call for I-81 to be expanded to six or eight lanes throughout the state, at a cost of up to \$11.4 billion. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and VDOT refused to study a full range of rail investment strategies in the FEIS and then proceeded to reject rail upgrades as an alternative to widening. Meanwhile, VDOT's application for the right to toll cars and trucks on the highway is pending before the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

The Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors discussed plans for I-81 at their October 9 meeting and directed County Administrator Vincent Poling to express their concerns in a letter sent October 10 to Gov. Kaine, Secretary of Transportation Pierce Homer, Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) Commissioner David S. Ekern and members of the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

"The Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors has stated that "widening I-81 in Shenandoah County is incompatible with our land use plans and should only be considered when every other less costly and destructive option has been considered. The current I-81 (plan) does not provide that level of reasonable analysis," said the Shenandoah County letter.

Shenandoah County officials and members of the Shenandoah Valley Network, citizens groups engaged in land use and transportation issues, object to VDOT's emphasis on widening the highway to the exclusion of the multiple approaches contained in "Reasonable Solutions: A Six Point Plan for I-81." Reasonable Solutions was endorsed by the boards of supervisors in Augusta, Rockingham, Shenandoah, Clarke and Albemarle Counties, the city of Roanoke,

towns of Front Royal, Toms Brook, New Market, Edinburg and Mt. Jackson, and 22 civic groups prior to VDOT's hearings on I-81 plans in April, 2006.

Reasonable Solutions advocates a balance of approaches to safety and congestion problems on I-81 – spot road improvements for documented trouble spots, greater freight diversion from trucks to rail, increased safety enforcement, better transit options – rather than the more costly, one-size-fits-all approach of corridor widening. But the final I-81 FEIS gives the legal weight only to widening, funded by tolls, and actually eliminates rail freight diversion as a legal option in the next stage of I-81 planning, known as the Tier 2.

Shenandoah County and the Shenandoah Valley Network requested that state officials reopen the I-81 Tier 1 FEIS to give greater consideration to rail freight diversion and the other options in Reasonable Solutions. “VDOT is discounting rail freight just when it seems more viable and critically necessary, given rising energy costs,” said Kim Sandum of Harrisonburg, president of Rockingham County's Community Alliance for Preservation (CAP).

In July, Norfolk Southern announced plans for a \$2 billion rail upgrade along the Crescent Corridor from New York to Texas that it projects will divert one million trucks from I-81, including 750,000 trucks in Virginia, up to 25 percent of the current total in the state. A Virginia study of rail freight diversion across multiple states on the corridor, mandated by the General Assembly, is due in early November. However, the rail investment recommendations from that study would lack the legal standing of the proposed road expansion in the I-81 Tier 1 FEIS.

Ms. Sandum said that the Rockingham County Board of Supervisors has directed its county administrator to send a letter to state officials about the I-81 plan, particularly a proposed new by-pass around Harrisonburg that would cut through the county's agricultural preserve area and impact the Cross Keys and Port Republic Battlefields. “We debated this loop road for eight years and came to the conclusion that it wasn't a top priority for Rockingham County, but VDOT put it into their plans for I-81 anyway,” Ms. Sandum said.

“It's time for the Governor and Secretary of Transportation to really listen to Shenandoah Valley residents,” who submitted 2,600 written comments last year on plans to use tolls to pay for a major expansion of I-81, said Megan Gallagher, director of the Shenandoah Valley Network. VDOT records indicate that 80 percent of those comments opposed tolls and 78 percent favored the meaningful use of rail freight diversion to deal with safety and congestion problems.

“Valley residents support immediate safety improvements to I-81, which have been identified since 1998, but they see no need to rush into costly highway widening at the expense of balanced and diverse options, with far fewer impacts at far less cost,” Ms. Gallagher added.

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The Shenandoah Valley Network links community groups working on land protection, land use and transportation issues in seven counties: Frederick, Warren, Shenandoah, Page, Rockingham, Augusta and Highland.
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