



West
Virginia
Highlands
Conservancy

Working since 1967 for the conservation of West Virginia's natural resources

12/12/2022

Mr. Travis Long, Director
Technical Support Division
West Virginia Division of Highways
1334 Smith Street
Charleston, West Virginia 25301

MEETING DATE: Monday, September 12, 2022, 4:00-7:00 PM

LOCATION: Blackwater Falls State Park Conference Room,
1584 Blackwater Falls Road, Davis, WV

SUBJECT: PUBLIC INFORMATIONAL WORKSHOP

PROJECT: Corridor H – Parsons to Davis

X347-H-55.68.00

ACNH-0484(290)

Tucker County

Greetings Mr. Long:

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy (WVHC) Highways Committee objects to the route chosen by the West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH) for the section of Corridor H between Parsons and Davis (ROPA) on the following grounds:

(1) The EIS must take into account **significant changes in the area's socio-economic environment** in the past twenty years.

Then, the area was losing population at an accelerating rate. From 1990 to 2000, it declined 21%. Now, the most recent census found population gains in Davis, from 624 to 782, and in Thomas, from 452 to 548. Then, coal mines had shut down, the railroad had been removed, and local businesses were closing their doors. Now, between 2012 and 2021 the number of businesses in the two towns doubled.

According to the recent report by Downstream Strategies, "Bracing for Change," "Together these two communities have gained notice among the most desirable small towns in America."

The completion of Corridor H from the east as far as Davis certainly contributed to these changes. Its current status has been ideal: **it brings people to the doorstep and doesn't wreck the house.**

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Expectations, strategies, and designs that might have been appropriate twenty years ago are not today. The highway should help east-west traffic to flow without changing the character and appeal of the area.

WVDOH and FHWA say the need for the project has three elements: improving east-west transportation; promoting economic development; and preserving and improving the quality of life in the region. *Any* route will accomplish the transportation objective, but the wrong route would have a negative effect on the region's developing economy and special quality of life.

A northern alignment will protect what has made this area an attractive destination for more visitors, residents, and businesses. It will preserve the Blackwater Industrial Complex, a National Register-eligible historic district. It will avoid the scenic trails already open and to come.

The 2007 SFEIS acknowledged in Section III that the ROPA would have particular negative impacts on Thomas: it would reduce tourist traffic through town, and it would not spur development to the west, around Benbush. Going north will give Thomas better access and better separation from long-distance truck traffic. It will reduce the noise, light, and visual impacts on Davis.

(2) **Truck Route:** WVDOH recognized that its ROPA failed to deal with the pressing issue of truck traffic through Thomas. It has tried to make up for it by rerouting Rt. 32 as a bypass. However, that fix would create new safety hazards at the additional intersections. It would also affect the Coketon mine pool and acid mine drainage in the vicinity of Pendleton Creek.

Instead of preserving the "greenway" between Thomas and Davis that was envisioned in Thomas's city plan, the truck route would mix through trucks with local traffic beyond the bypass, a problem that will become worse over time according to WVDOH's traffic estimates.

The obvious solution is to direct long-distance traffic coming from the north directly onto Corridor H. The northern route should be recognized as the real truck bypass.

(3) Other issues: **Noise, light, and visual effects** must be analyzed, especially for Davis and the area surrounding the proposed bridge over the North Fork of Blackwater. How will the ROPA affect the State Park's application for Dark Sky status?

WVDOH says that the ROPA would not be seen from Lindy Point. But that's not the only iconic viewpoint. A spatial analysis by Prof. Strager of WVU's School of Natural Resources shows that the ROPA could be seen from State Park roads and overlooks. Throughout the Blackwater area, its sounds and lights would affect visitors' experience of the natural world.



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On the western end, where the ROPA would climb Backbone Mountain, **geology** is a serious concern. The Mauch Chunk formation is notoriously unstable. Building a four-lane highway where the two-lane US 219 barely fits would require enormous cutbacks.

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Rivers Committee objects to the route chosen by the West Virginia Division of Highways for the section of Corridor H between Parsons and Davis (ROPA) on the following grounds:

(1) The ROPA threatens the quality of trout streams and their wetlands and watersheds, including Tier 3 streams such as Mill Run and Slip Hill Mill Run. A stream designated as a Tier 3 stream is a high quality water or naturally reproducing trout stream. Pursuant to 60CSR5, “Antidegradation Implementation Procedures,” this includes those waters whose unique character, ecological or recreational value, or pristine nature constitutes a valuable national or state resource. Of high concern to the Rivers Committee is the Big Run Bog watershed. Big Run Bog is located within the Monongahela National Forest and is a National Natural Landmark, a designation granted by the National Park Service due to its unique and undisturbed nature. The National Park Service describes it as a Pleistocene relict community containing a high-altitude northern sphagnum-red spruce bog that is far south of its normal range. It harbors large numbers of rare plants and animals, many at the extremes of their range. The diversity of the habitats makes the area valuable as a refuge for a large variety of biota. (US DOI, National Park Service Natural Landmark Brief, September 2009. Dr. Jesse F. Clovis, West Virginia University, January 1974.) It also qualifies as a Tier 3 water pursuant to 47CSR2A-4.2a, because its waters are located within the boundaries of a national forest and is bounded on both sides of the water by public land.

Mill Run, Slip Hill Mill Run and Big Run Bog watersheds abut and the terrain where they abut is narrow and steep. The ROPA, a four lane highway, will cut through the Mill Run Watershed and the portion of the Slip Hill Mill Run watershed where it abuts with the Big Run Bog watershed. Due to the close proximity and steep terrain of these watersheds, it is more than likely that the waters in all of these watersheds will be degraded by the construction of the ROPA, an unacceptable violation of their protected status as Tier 3 waters and a National Natural Landmark. In addition, WVDOH has provided maps that indicate that a section of the ROPA will actually go through the top of the Big Run Bog watershed and have commented at the public meeting held at Blackwater Falls State Park on September 12, 2022 that they will be “bridging” Big Run Bog watershed—a clear violation of its protected status.

(2) The WVHC Rivers Committee does not have confidence that permit conditions that are intended to protect water quality will be followed during the construction of the ROPA. Since 2017, during the construction of the Kerens to Parsons section of Corridor H, there have been over 50 violations documenting over 300

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instances of non-compliance including: failure to implement and maintain sediment controls; failure to prevent muddy water from leaving construction sites; causing sediment plumes; and causing deposition of sediment on the bottom of streams. All of these types of violations are major threats to the health of the Mill Run, Slip Hill Mill Run and Big Run Bog watersheds as well as the other waters that the ROPA would cross.

(3) The ROPA will endanger the North Fork of the Blackwater River, the Blackwater River, the Cheat River and their watersheds with potential releases of acid mine drainage. These waters provide drinking water to the public and numerous recreational activities-indeed, they are a large part of the natural environment that draws ever increasing tourism to the Thomas and Davis area. A degradation of these waters with acid mine drainage will threaten the health of local residents and the growing economies of Thomas and Davis. The ROPA cuts through land that was extensively mined and abandoned. State, federal and private groups have spent a great deal of time, energy and money to treat the acid mine drainage issues that these rivers have faced in the past and still currently face. Construction of a four lane highway in this area, particularly the bridge that is planned to cross the North Fork of the Blackwater River, creates a severe and unacceptable risk to the waters that are beginning to recover from acid mine drainage.

In conclusion, we expect WVDOH to work to address these concerns while considering the overwhelming support from locals, small businesses and visitors alike to use a northern alternative to the ROPA.

Sincerely,

Larry V. Thomas, President

cc: Jason Workman, Program Development Director
Federal Highway Administration, West Virginia Division