



FUTURE 73: PICKING A **PATH**

Study: Central corridor would be best for Roanoke

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Roanoke will have to improve streets and downtown buildings if it hopes to benefit from Interstate 73, a consultant has told city officials.

The nearly 60-page study by Economic Development Research Group of Boston, released last week, offers this bottom line: "There is no perfect choice for alignment of I-73."

In general, I-73 would benefit the Roanoke region and speed up travel, especially if the road goes through the center of Roanoke or to the east through Bedford and Botetourt counties, the report said.

Roanoke's greatest economic boost would come from the central corridor that follows U.S. 220 and Interstate 581 before linking with Interstate 81 north of the city.

Only the central alignment offers much relief for congestion on I-581, especially if it were attached to a corridor that parallels Starkey Road in Roanoke County, the report said.

If Roanoke is to reap the central corridor's benefits, the city must improve streets, redevelop industrial and commercial sites, and subsidize development.

"If those steps are not taken, then the city risks limiting prospects for regional economic development," the report said.

Conversely, Roanoke would be hurt most by the eastern corridor, which would have three interchanges in Bedford and Botetourt counties with much developable "green field" land available.

What topic surrounding I-73 concerns you most?

- Environment, including plants, wildlife and air pollution
- Highway safety
- Land conservation
- Jobs and economic growth
- Build it as a new interstate
- Improve U.S. 220
- Other

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Many Roanoke jobs and businesses would be drawn out of the city and into the suburbs.

Cities typically adjust when jobs migrate to the suburbs by developing new sectors of their economies, the consultants said.

The third option, known as the western corridor, would have the least effect - positively or negatively - on the city. It veers west from U.S. 220 and bypasses Roanoke and Salem before linking with I-81 at Dixie Caverns. It would foster little economic benefit for the valley, the consultants said.

If either the eastern or western bypass routes were chosen, upgrades would be necessary to U.S. 460 and U.S. 221, respectively, to create a spur between the interstate and the city. Signs and visitor centers would be needed, the report said.

The report compares those corridors with a "no build" option in which the Virginia Department of Transportation would simply upgrade the U.S. 220 / I-581 corridor.

In the report's opinion, the no-build option would lead to severe congestion on I-581 by 2020 and would degrade downtown access. The area's advantage as a distribution and tourist center would be eliminated.

Case studies compared Roanoke to Danville; Richmond; Fort Wayne, Ind.; and Appleton, Wis. - cities with an existing central highway that was bypassed by a new highway.

Those studies showed that the effects on the cities were typically less severe than anticipated.

New highways bypassing the central business district can weaken the district's economy but usually do not devastate it. Also, new development is not automatic. It requires utility services at the new interchanges, local access roads and favorable land-use regulations, the study found.

Three major economic factors were analyzed in the \$29,500 study: Roanoke's economy, tourism and traffic. Each corridor's positive and negative effects in those areas were studied.

The central corridor

Roanoke's dominant industries are wholesale trade, transportation, services and a grouping called finance, insurance and real estate. Service-sector jobs grew by 46.7 percent from 1988 to 1998, while

wholesale trade jobs fell 11.4 percent.

Transportation, communications and utility jobs grew by 19.4 percent. Jobs in the finance grouping dropped 0.7 percent, according to study data.

In a no-build scenario, the city could experience a continued loss in manufacturing at the rate of 2,500 jobs per decade, according to the report.

However, I-73 could spur new growth in the electronics and instruments industries, perhaps halving the rate of lost industrial jobs in the city, the consultants said.

With redevelopment of industrial sites, another 2,000 industrial and office jobs could be attracted in the decade after I-73's completion. That could spur 1,070 jobs in other sectors filling orders for those companies, and create an additional \$110 million in annual worker income.

The central corridor could solidify the central city as the region's base of office-type industries if good highway access is provided to downtown.

With the central route, Roanoke stands to gain a potential \$30 million in retail sales. Another \$20 million in sales could be generated as a result of industrial and office growth. If that happens, the city could stand to gain an additional \$500,000 in annual sales tax revenues.

The study suggests Roanoke is visited by nearly 8 percent of all tourists to Virginia and the city has a concentration of tourist-serving industries 19 percent higher than the state average. However, hotel employment in the city and region has declined by 14 percent in the past 10 years.

Perceptions of improved access to Roanoke would bring 16,000 travelers through the city each day and up to \$60 million in revenue, the study said.

This travel market could be tapped most easily by the central corridor, the study concluded. Adequate signs, marketing, lodging capacity and highway accessibility would be required.

The central corridor also would lessen traffic congestion more than the eastern or western routes. The report says adding a lane in each direction to I-581 and improving its interchanges would more

than offset the additional traffic.

The eastern corridor

Suburban areas along this corridor are already experiencing economic gains associated with a growing population base outside the city.

Office space in the northern suburbs has increased by 12 percent, and the southern suburbs have gained 8 percent since 1996, while the city experienced a drop of 8 percent.

Gains in transportation, communications and utilities jobs in the suburbs outpaced the city's by a 48 percent to 19 percent margin.

The suburbs also seem to be dominating the city in the area of finance, insurance and real estate, gaining 4,700 jobs and now holding more than half of those positions in the valley.

Manufacturing facilities have been taking advantage of available land to increase employment rates by 14 percent, while the city's fell by 27 percent.

Reflecting those figures, the eastern alignment provides the greatest potential for new development because it would have interchanges at U.S. 460, Virginia 24 and Virginia 634. A surplus of developable land would be available, but "essentially all of that new development would be outside the city limits," the report said.

The growing population in Bedford and Botetourt counties would be served by the new development, but the city would lose jobs, retail activity and tax revenue, the report concluded.

The eastern corridor probably would worsen congestion on the northern part of I-581 because traffic between the South and Midwest would use it as a shortcut.

The western corridor

This corridor would bypass Roanoke and Salem to the west, connecting with I-81 at Dixie Caverns.

This route simultaneously provides for the least potential opportunity for economic gain and the least risk of loss to the city.

Only one interchange is proposed, at U.S. 221 near Poages Mill, and rugged terrain would hinder development there. This route could force vehicles traveling between the Northeast and the Martinsville area to use I-581, adding to its congestion.

But the western route would strengthen the Roanoke area's link with Virginia Tech by reducing travel time, the consultants said.

The consultants did not consider potential effects of air pollution. That topic is addressed in a VDOT environmental study now being reviewed by several federal agencies.

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