



Southern
Environmental
Law Center

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July 18, 2011

The Honorable Sean Connaughton
Honorable Members of the Commonwealth Transportation Board
Office of the Secretary of Transportation
Patrick Henry Building, 3rd Floor
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23219

Re: Funding for the Route 29 Western Bypass of Charlottesville

Dear Secretary Connaughton and Members of the Commonwealth Transportation Board:

Although the agenda for the meeting of the Commonwealth Transportation Board this Wednesday still has not been posted on the CTB website as of 10:30 this morning, a couple of press accounts have quoted Secretary Connaughton as planning to propose major amendments to the recently adopted Six-Year Improvement Program (SYIP) at your meeting this week. Reportedly, the amendments would transfer roughly \$230 million to two proposals in the Charlottesville-Albemarle area: the Route 29 Western Bypass and widening a section of Route 29 in northern Albemarle County. Of the two projects, the Bypass will account for the lion's share of this sizable funding transfer, requiring almost \$200 million. In addition, we understand the Charlottesville-Albemarle Metropolitan Planning Organization's (CAMPO) Policy Board will be sending you a letter outlining a number of additional projects that have been discussed with either the Secretary or the Commissioner and which they would like you to consider funding or advancing along with the bypass and the widening project as part of the deal for the removal of their longstanding objection to constructing the Bypass.

There are numerous reasons why the Southern Environmental Law Center has long opposed the Route 29 Western Bypass proposal, why numerous transportation professionals have recognized the very limited value of the project, and why the state has funded development of alternatives to the Bypass. At just over six miles long, the Bypass would cost taxpayers \$40 million or more *per mile*. This would be about \$20 million per traffic signal avoided by through traffic and roughly \$100 million per minute saved compared to other, more cost-effective options for reducing congestion on Route 29. Yet according to VDOT's own studies, it would not measurably improve the level of service along Route 29. And significant new development has been built or approved north of where it ties back into Route 29, severely limiting its utility as a "bypass" for through travelers.

The slight benefits the proposed bypass might offer are outweighed not only by the enormous cost to taxpayers but also by the significant damage this project would cause. After carving through rural landscapes west of Charlottesville, the proposed route curves back in

toward Albemarle's urban area, forcing children to breathe harmful exhaust as it passes close to six schools and running alongside a reservoir that serves as the primary source of drinking water for tens of thousands of Albemarle and Charlottesville residents. Appropriately, Taxpayers for Common Sense and Friends of the Earth have repeatedly included the Bypass on their list of the most damaging and financially wasteful highway projects in the entire country.

Albemarle County and the City of Charlottesville have participated with VDOT in numerous studies in recent years demonstrating that there are less costly and more efficient ways to reduce congestion along this portion of the Route 29 corridor than building the Bypass. Because such a large percentage (nearly 90%) of the vehicles on the most congested portion of Route 29 in the Charlottesville-Albemarle area are making "local" trips, the most effective solutions involve a combination of an enhanced parallel road network and improvements to key intersections that siphon local drivers off Route 29 and allow a more continuous flowing movement for through travelers. Recognizing this, the state has provided millions of dollars to help move these solutions forward, and these more cost-effective priorities are currently reflected in the CAMPO's long-range transportation plan and recently adopted FY 12-15 transportation improvement program. Both of these documents have explicitly opposed construction funding for the Route 29 Western Bypass for many years.

However, the CAMPO is suddenly considering an amendment to its plans that would allow construction funding to be allocated to the Bypass. The CAMPO's interest in reviving the proposal is based on the Secretary's reported assurances that the state will make full funding available for construction of the Bypass *and* the lane-widening project on Route 29 referenced above, as well as the perception of at least some members of the CAMPO that some additional projects may also be funded if the CAMPO removes its opposition to the Bypass. Further, the Secretary has recently stated that none of the \$230 million in funding to be allocated to the Bypass and widening project (which may not be enough to complete them) will be taken from other Charlottesville or Albemarle projects, meaning the CAMPO does not have to worry about which other projects might suffer funding setbacks as a result of suddenly making the Bypass a priority.

Like the CAMPO, you are now being urged to catapult an ineffective project to the top of your list of priorities by making significant changes to the SYIP you adopted just last month. But unlike the CAMPO, you must seriously consider where the funding is coming from and decide whether the proposal reflects a wise and effective use of the money. The severe shortage of available transportation funding in recent years has led to an increasing recognition in the Commonwealth of the need to prioritize projects. Shifting these funds will inevitably shortchange other projects. In light of the major maintenance and construction funding shortfalls plaguing areas throughout the Commonwealth, the ineffective Route 29 Western Bypass proposal is clearly not a wise use of over \$200 million in scarce transportation funding. Moreover, the full cost and impact of the Bypass is unknown since at least one major element of the design for the proposed highway—the interchange for the northern terminus—is not complete.

We strongly urge you to reject the proposed SYIP amendment that would allocate construction funding to the Route 29 Western Bypass, and to instead put these taxpayer funds toward one or more projects that will generate far greater benefits—including projects to improve the Route 29 corridor.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns and recommendations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Trip Pollard". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "T" and a cursive "P".

Trip Pollard
Director, Land and Community Program

Morgan Butler
Senior Attorney