



To: Senator Mark Warner, Senator Tim Kaine, Congressman Ben Cline, Congresswoman Jennifer Wexton
CC: Governor Ralph Northam, Secretary of Transportation Shannon Valentine, Staunton District CTB Member Dixon Whitworth
From: Kate Wofford, Executive Director, Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley
Keven Walker, Chief Executive Office, Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation
9386 South Congress Street, New Market VA 22844
Date: April 17, 2020
RE: Targeted Approach to Possible Interstate 81 Funds in Federal Infrastructure Package

We understand that leaders in Congress and the Administration are in discussion about a possible infrastructure bill as part of the federal response to COVID 19 impacts, as well as possible reauthorization of the federal surface transportation law.

We expect that you are receiving a number of requests from localities, constituents, interest groups, and others seeking infrastructure funds for priority projects. We are writing to urge a targeted and well-considered approach to any federal funding for transportation projects in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, particularly any funding for projects involving Interstate 81.

The I-81 corridor in Virginia can certainly use improvements, and it has been a focus of concern for local and regional travelers for many years. In the past 15 years, there have been a wide range of proposals to address these concerns—some have been simply awful, while others have been fairly good. The awful ones call for extensive, excessive widening of I-81 regardless of the cost to taxpayers, transportation needs, or impacts on communities, health, and natural and historic resources.

Among other things, overbuilding on I-81 would degrade the rural character of the corridor—damaging historic resources and streams and destroying productive farmland, homes and businesses. Air quality would likely be severely degraded, bringing risk to our most vulnerable residents.

The good proposals, on the other hand, are targeted, data-driven, and supported by public input. With that in mind, we urge you to look hard at Virginia's recent approach when considering possible federal funds for I-81.

In response to action taken by the General Assembly in 2018 and 2019, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment (OIPI) completed an I-81 Corridor

Study (http://www.ctb.virginia.gov/projects/major_projects/i-81_study.asp) which included both corridor-wide operational improvements as well as targeted capital projects identified by safety data.

VDOT reviewed crash data for the previous five years and identified segments of the I-81 corridor that had the top 20 percent of crashes. These areas, as well as specific projects that address safety concerns, were vetted at a series of public meetings and through several rounds of public comments, resulting in a list of discrete projects with broad public support. Following identification of capital project needs, a committee was formed to oversee implementation of the I-81 Corridor Plan and recommend project prioritization. In accordance with state legislation, this oversight committee is made up of elected officials so that the public might have an ongoing voice in I-81 improvements.

While we do not believe Virginia's I-81 Corridor Plan is perfect—it is overly reliant on pavement and widening—the process of developing this plan successfully included public input and generated public support for the final project list. In fact, legislators in other parts of Virginia have recommended the same process be used on important interstates in their regions.

At the federal level, we do not know whether improvements to Interstate 81 might be included in an infrastructure package. If so, we strongly encourage solutions that are effective and bring fewer negative impacts on communities, health, and natural and cultural resources. These solutions include operational improvements, increased transit options, public investments that move freight by rail instead of truck, improvements to local road networks, and bicycle and pedestrian networks in communities within the corridor. Finally, as described above, we encourage any funding for capital improvements to be directed toward projects identified in Virginia's I-81 Corridor Plan.

We also note that it is critical to prevent further weakening of environmental review of transportation projects in any federal legislation. The opportunity for the public to understand proposed projects and work with transportation officials to mitigate negative impacts consistently results in projects that are a better fit with the Shenandoah Valley's extraordinary natural resources, historic and cultural resources, and our local communities.

Thanks so much for your consideration during this difficult time. Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley and the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, both based in New Market, Virginia, have been working closely with local and state elected officials and communities for 15 years, advocating for sensible and effective solutions to the problems on the I-81.

We appreciate your leadership and would be glad to provide any additional information.