

Business group's transportation wish list includes I-81, I-73 projects

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By Jeff Sturgeon | The Roanoke Times
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A business group released a \$54 billion transportation to-do list for Virginia Tuesday, saying the priorities should include new lanes for Interstate 81 and a new Southwest Virginia interstate.

The [Washington, D.C., transportation-research group TRIP](#) identified 50 projects Tuesday that its leaders say must happen for the state to return to prolonged growth. The picture is already looking up, with state's economy growing 2.6 percent in 2010, versus 0.9 percent for the United States, according to the report.

To keep that going, TRIP advised adding at least one lane in each direction to I-81 in the Roanoke Valley, Wythe County and three spots in the Shenandoah Valley at a cost of nearly \$1.6 billion and spending nearly \$4 billion to complete the proposed new interstate, I-73, from Roanoke to near Martinsville.

Most of the projects on TRIP's list are in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads.

Working with much smaller numbers than the \$54 billion in TRIP's proposal, the General Assembly and Gov. Bob McDonnell say they will free up \$4 billion for transportation spending in coming years. The administration said the money will accelerate nearly 900 projects.

TRIP is funded by insurers, equipment companies, transportation construction and engineering firms, labor unions and transportation interest groups.

Carolyn Bonifas, TRIP's associate director of research, said the report is intended as information to guide the allocation of scarce transportation dollars. It does not contain guidance on how to pay for the projects, she said.

TRIP held a press conference in conjunction with the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce today.

"Transportation and education are two key elements of a strong regional economy," said Ken Lanford, chamber chair and president of Roanoke highway and bridge contractor Lanford Brothers Co, in prepared remarks.

"The Roanoke Region is fortunate to be strategically situated in an attractive part of Virginia. Expanding and improving our infrastructure, including roads, rails, transit and the efficient flow of goods will further strengthen our economic development efforts."