

# Upgrades to improve S.W. Va. highways

## Gov. Bob McDonnell wants to focus on an interchange in Roanoke and a U.S. 460 intersection by Virginia Tech.

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Now that Virginia is likely going forward with plans to expand its highway system through billions of dollars of new construction, getting around Southwest Virginia is looking to get easier.

Identified as top priorities by Gov. Bob McDonnell are the half-done Valley View Boulevard interchange in Roanoke, which is listed for \$62 million of upgrades, and the Southgate Drive/U.S. 460 intersection adjacent to Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, which is down for a \$41 million rebuild.

Each house of the Virginia General Assembly has passed a version of the \$4 billion transportation spending bill McDonnell announced Dec. 9 in Roanoke.

The package is on its way to final passage, with some details to be negotiated to bring the two versions to alignment.

It promises "the greatest investment in transportation in the Commonwealth in a generation," McDonnell said in a news release Tuesday.

Virginia faced a period of declining transportation revenue earlier this decade, but the money has dramatically improved. The federal government poured billions into transportation through the Obama administration's stimulus plan. The McDonnell initiative offers more.

The stimulus money is going into projects such as improvements to the Elm Avenue interchange in Roanoke, widening of U.S. 460 through Glenvar, and widening and straightening of U.S. 221 in Southwest Roanoke County.

Transportation planners are seeing the state build road projects whose need has been evident for years. The U.S. 460 and U.S. 221 projects are already under way.

Many of nearly 900 projects McDonnell has listed as his priorities "are projects that have been well documented on past plans and on past programs that had been defunded and now they're being refunded," said Mark McCaskill, a senior planner at the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission.

The current interchange at Valley View Boulevard in Roanoke was completed in 1999. The improvements were added to the Virginia Department of Transportation's six-year plan in 2008 and removed a year later. City officials hope the expanded

interchange could open up a pair of undeveloped parcels totaling about 120 acres on the west side of Interstate 581.

A VDOT plan for an above-grade Southgate interchange in Montgomery County would replace a current T-intersection with stoplights that is a popular entryway into campus, especially for Virginia Tech sporting events. A new interchange could also open up land to the west of U.S. 460 for future university use, spokesman Larry Hincker said Tuesday.

However, as McDonnell knows, Virginia hasn't implemented a long-term source of transportation revenue.

That darkens the 25-year planning horizon, with Virginia's highway maintenance needs taking a huge bite of construction budgets between now and 2035.

"Our long-term projections don't look rosy going out," said Jake Gilmer, another senior planner with the regional commission.

Meanwhile, a business group released a new report Tuesday that makes the McDonnell plan look like a few drops in a bucket.

The Washington, D.C., transportation-research group TRIP released a \$54 billion transportation to-do list for Virginia, saying the priorities should include new lanes for Interstate 81 and a new Southwest Virginia interstate.

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

Its wish list leans heavily toward Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, but there are several projects of high interest to residents of Southwest Virginia.

TRIP identified 50 projects that its leaders said must happen for the state to return to prolonged growth. Growth is already 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 freeway, Interstate 73, from Roanoke to near Martinsville.



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.

VDOT spokesman Jeff Caldwell called the governor's plan progress toward better infrastructure through "strategic investments, aggressive pursuit of transportation funding without raising taxes, and long-range planning to keep Virginia moving."

TRIP held a news conference in conjunction with the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce on Tuesday.

"Transportation and education are two key elements of a strong regional economy," said Ken Lanford, chamber chairman 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." Staff writer Mike Sluss contributed to this report.