



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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The Road to Economic Growth and Possibilities

Robbie Morris, Chairman
Robert C. Byrd Corridor H Highway Authority

Robbie Morris is Chairman of the Robert C. Byrd Corridor H Highway Authority. He is also Executive Director of the Randolph County Development Authority (RCDA) and the West Virginia Wood Technology Center.

Morris earned undergraduate degrees in political science and history, and a master's degree in business administration, from West Virginia Wesleyan College.

In 2009, as a member of the Board of Directors for the Elkins-Randolph County Chamber of Commerce, he stepped up to fill the executive director position. Two years later, he was encouraged by his chamber peers to apply for the executive director position with the RCDA, where he remains today.

Morris is President of the United Way of Randolph County, Assistant Director of the Mountain State Forest Festival and Vice President of the West Virginia Economic Development Council and West Virginia Hardwood Alliance Zone.

He is a board member of the Highland Trails Foundation, West Virginia for Better Transportation, Elkins-Randolph County Chamber of Commerce, Randolph County Convention and Visitors Bureau, Leadership West Virginia and the West Virginia Wesleyan College Alumni Council. He is also treasurer of Elkins Main Street and a member of the Beverly Elementary School PTO.

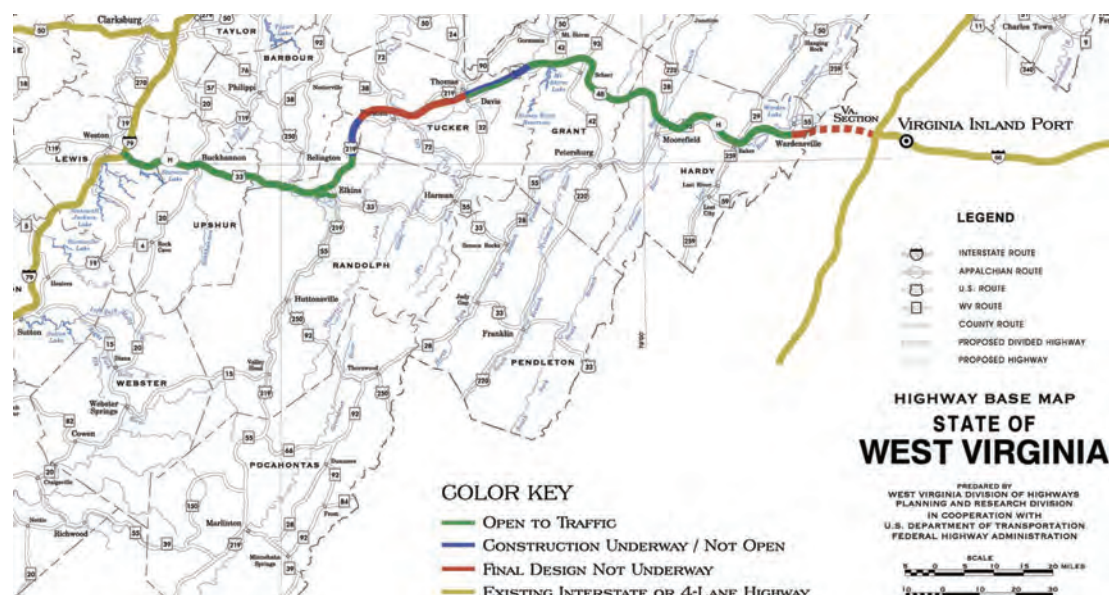
Rolling through the beautiful hills of north central West Virginia, Corridor H holds promise of economic development opportunities the area needs in order to grow. Corridor H is a beautiful four-lane highway that stretches for 130 miles from I-79 at Weston, West Virginia, to the Virginia border, where it is designed to travel an additional 13 miles to I-81 near the I-66 junction at Front Royal, Virginia. While great progress has been made toward its conclusion, it remains the only Appalachian Corridor project left to be completed in West Virginia.

When conceived in 1964, the Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS) was designed to help remote areas of Appalachia achieve economic prosperity through modern transportation infrastructure. Today, the ADHS is currently authorized at 3,090 miles across the country. The Corridor H highway in West Virginia is 87 percent complete or under construction/contract, and is scheduled to reach 90 percent in 2018.

Construction of Corridor H started slowly in the 1970s and its long history is filled with obstacles related to funding and other concerns that have delayed its completion. In 2012, Virginia publicly acknowledged, for the first time, that they would complete their section of the highway in the mid-2020s. Since that time, Virginia has restructured the way its Department of Transportation prioritizes construction projects, and Corridor H has yet to even make the list. West Virginia's section is scheduled to be complete between 2037-2042. As the years tick by, so do all the missed economic opportunities that would help enrich the state.

An economic impact study released in October 2013 found that finishing Corridor H by 2020 would result in an additional \$1.25 billion dollars in economic output, when compared with completion of the highway by 2036 – and that does not include the impact from construction itself. This difference in economic impact can be explained by the decrease of transportation costs

The Corridor H Highway





in creating a more direct route along the path of Corridor H to I-81 and I-66 at Front Royal, Virginia, and the increase in business investment by providing a route to the port of Norfolk, which would open the state up to global markets. The study also shows that the completion of Corridor H by 2020 would allow for an increase of \$360 million in wages throughout the state and an increase of around 534 jobs annually.

While the goal of completing Corridor H by 2020 has come and gone, the point remains that West Virginia loses millions of dollars in economic opportunity each year it is not completed. Once it is finished, the state will see a significant increase in economic output in all areas of the economy, but especially in the manufacturing, transportation and construction fields. Manufacturing alone would increase by \$275 million between 2020 and 2036, with transportation and warehousing increasing by an estimated \$219 million following the construction of Corridor H during that period.

Making it easier for the eastern United States to reach our world class outdoor recreational attractions, along with our institutions of higher education, will be a

major benefit to West Virginia as a whole. This road is not only about the seven counties that Corridor H calls home; it is about an economic development tool that will benefit the entire state.

The use of public-private partnerships has given new life to the project. In 2008, the West Virginia Legislature passed the Public-Private Transportation Facilities Act, which gave way for Public-Private Partnerships to change the way governments repair and construct roads. The act allows the West Virginia Division of Highways to partner with a private company on the design and construction of otherwise public transportation facilities.

Currently, motorists can travel from Weston to Kerens, in Randolph County, and Davis to Wardensville without stopping. The section currently under construction is a 7.5-mile segment from Kerens toward Parsons. It is anticipated the WVDOH will award an additional 3.2-mile segment in late June 2018 that, once completed, will link Weston to Parsons. That will leave the following segments to be contracted: approximately another 3.5-mile section from Parsons to Davis and a 6.8-mile section from

Wardensville to the Virginia state line. With each passing mile, Corridor H is closer to completion. Each bit of momentum brings much needed economic opportunity. You only need to see the growth around Weston, Buckhannon, Moorefield and Wardensville. Talk with the businesses in Davis and Thomas that are already reporting higher traffic flow due to the eastern section of the road being completed. The prosperity that can be realized from a fully finished Corridor H is already showing signs of promise as we get closer to completion.

It is the hope of the Corridor H Authority, along with many West Virginians, that progress will continue at an accelerated pace so that the state may begin to reap the benefits from the highway that was promised many years ago. For the future of West Virginia, we need Corridor H completed, and we need it completed now. ▽