

# Morris says he will fight the new 460 route

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News editor

Del. Rick Morris, R-64th, plans to fight the proposed improvements for Route 460, which bypasses Windsor to the north and stops just west of Zuni.

"I'd rather have no road than a bad road," said Morris last week at the Richard T. Holland Post-Legislative breakfast at The Smithfield Center.

There's no sense going forward with a bad idea just because the state wasted \$300 million, said Morris, who represents Isle of Wight County.

Morris was referring to the money spent on design work by the company contracted for the job, US 460 Mobility Partners, before the state obtained the necessary permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to continue with the original alignment — a limited access tolled highway that ran 55-miles from Petersburg to Suffolk which bypassed Windsor to the south. Despite spending the money, not a shovel of dirt has been turned so far on the project, which has been in the works for about 10 years.

The original 55-mile alignment was halted last year when an initial environmental impact statement revealed excessive wetlands impacts. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ordered VDOT to complete a supplemental environmental impact statement, at a cost of \$4.5 million, which came up with five other alternative routes, including a no-build option.

VDOT ended up rec-

ommending a hybrid of one of the five alternatives because it was the most likely to be permitted by the Corps, according to officials.

The preferred alternative, while approved by the Commonwealth Transportation Board last month, must still receive the necessary permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The 17-mile hybrid runs from Suffolk at the Route 58/460 interchange to just west of Zuni, with a bypass north of Windsor. A bridge at the Blackwater River in Zuni is also in the plans to alleviate long-standing flooding in that area.

The preferred alternative is expected to cost \$375-\$425 million.

Morris said the final decision to proceed with actual construction rests with Gov. Terry McAuliffe.

"There is major influence from the governor's office," he said in a phone interview Thursday.

Virginia Transportation Secretary Aubrey Layne Jr. said Monday that it's not possible for McAuliffe to stop the project once the Commonwealth Transportation Board approved the route last month.

McAuliffe can say he doesn't support the project, but so far he hasn't dictated an outcome, Layne said.

Morris was a proponent of the original alignment when it was being pushed by former Gov. Bob McDonnell as a tool for economic development at the Port of Virginia and the Hampton Roads region.

But that support was based on a lack of informa-

tion at the time, such as the fact that the state continued to move forward before obtaining the necessary permits, Morris said.

That's what's wrong with public-private partnerships — information is not disclosed freely, he said.

The original Route 460 realignment was under the state's public private partnership provisions, with some of funding to come from tolls imposed by the contractor, coupled with state-issued bonds and operation by the state.

There were other factors involved in nixing the original route, such as the need and purpose for the new highway did not outweigh the need to mitigate the wetlands, Morris said, adding that if the need and purpose were strong enough, the Corps could have advised the state to mitigate wetlands impacts instead of ordering another environmental impact statement that ultimately changed the route.

The new Route 460 was expected to promote economic development, improve safety and provide an enhanced hurricane evacuation route for southern Hampton Roads and North Carolina. The preferred alternative is also supposed to address those issues, although many have questioned the improvements stopping just west of Zuni — with no further improve-

ments planned — as well as a lack of access to Isle of Wight's intermodal park, which was developed in conjunction with the expansion of the port.

Layne said that evacuation means simply to get residents out of harms way and getting them to Zuni takes care of that. The state isn't interested in where they stay — the issue is to get them out of the way, he said, adding that the bridge will take care of the flooding problems in Zuni.

Morris said that although the General Assembly can't vote to stop the project, residents can continue to voice as much opposition as possible.

"I haven't met one citizen affected by this road who is in favor of it," he said.