

Improve existing roads, save money

Dear Editor:

This is in support of improving local roads in Blount County. But, instead of the "build options" presented by TDOT in their draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the proposed Pel-lissippi Parkway (PP) extension, I propose another option that could save taxpayers tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars and maintain quality of life in Blount County.

I have lived in Blount County for the past 38 years. I chose to live here because of the county's scenic, rural, and agricultural values, in short because it is a beautiful quiet place to live. I have tried to maintain those county values during the past 25 years as a citizen volunteer and board member of the Foothills Land Conservancy, which has helped landowners conserve the conservation values of more than 25,000 acres in East Tennessee. My reasons for opposing the PP build options include:

■ The PP extension project will lead to the degradation of the very values I listed above, degradation made possible through taxes that I pay. Residential and commercial development would likely "explode" in the rural land through which the PP extension would pass, as it has done on the north end of PP in Knox County. The result would be diminished quality of life exacerbated by replacement of rural farmlands, scenic woodlands and rural housing by dense subdivision housing and commercial development. I note that quality of life was not addressed in the PP DEIS under Social/Community Cohesion; it should have been. Look at the 10-year PP lawsuit, public hearings, debates and arguments that PP has already caused at all levels in local, state and federal government — and social circles.

■ Tax debt burden and public tax increases. Blount County's tax debt is already \$96 million and rising. The PP Extension would result in dramatically increased demand for infrastructure improvements and social services inevitably followed by county tax hikes. A conservative estimate is that the Blount County population would

increase by 5,000 in the area made more accessible by PP, resulting in the need for two to three new schools, water, sewer, landfills, enforcement etc. It would not be surprising to see another \$100-200 million added to the tax debt by PP extension. Thanks but no thanks.

■ The TDOT DEIS showed that PP will not improve traffic congestion, not reduce crash incidence, and will not improve levels of services. In fact, it may increase congestion as more people move into the area crowding existing local roads and streets. Folks may travel faster and in higher volume down PP but once they get off, it will be a traffic nightmare.

■ It will increase the public national debt by more than \$100 million at a time the nation is so deeply in debt. The cost of PP will be 80 percent federal and 20 percent state match. The feds are already deep in debt and the state can't meet its existing obligations.

■ The PP DEIS lists as justification to "enhance regional transportation system linkages" like the proposed Southern Blount County Loop or the suggested Interstate 3. Note: none of these so-called goals have been endorsed by the public and would likely be challenged for some of the same reasons for PP.

■ Improved public bus transportation was listed as part of the rationale for PP. Blount County doesn't even have public bus transportation nor does Knox County have any to Blount County.

■ The "Need and Purpose" for PP extension were presented by TDOT in the Public Hearing document July 20, 2010, at Heritage High School. Practically all of the reasons for PP justification could be met by another, less expensive alternative (E). Instead of extending PP, use the money planned for PP to improve the existing local roads.

In fact, Blount County Road Commissioner Dunlap commented that this could be done for only half the \$104 million proposed by TDOT for PP extension. It is understood that PP money is a federal-state match so our legislators would need to arrange a special appropriation of \$52 million for local road improvements, but that would save the federal/state budgets \$52 million and help preserve

the quality of life in Blount County in the process. Sounds like a bargain to me.

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