

The Greater Hagerstown Committee (GHC) would like to join with all of Washington County to ask the Governor for a formal plan to widen our 12-mile stretch of I-81. This critical transportation project is long overdue and our community has been unified in advocating for these improvements for nearly three decades.

In 1998, GHC chaired a Quad State Task Force on I-81 comprised of public and private officials from MD, WV, PA, and VA. This multi-state task force concluded that improvements to I-81 from Harrisonburg, VA to Harrisburg, PA were “a must do project” for the safety of the citizens and as “the single most important economic development asset in the region”. Since that report, widening I-81 has been listed as a top priority project for the Hagerstown-Eastern Panhandle Metropolitan Planning Organization (HEPMPO), County Government, City of Hagerstown, our State Delegation, the Washington County Community Coalition, and the local business community. All of the various federal elected officials over the last 20 years have publicly expressed their support for I-81 improvements. Yet to date, the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) has no formal funding plan to complete a third lane each direction for our 12-mile stretch of highway.

Our community was optimistic I-81 improvements would move forward when the state funded a formal purpose and needs study in 2001. However, following the review of several design options and the approval for inside lane widening, progress came to a screeching halt and the project sat dormant for over a decade. Finally, in 2014 under the O’Malley administration, MDOT announced Phase 1 of the I-81 widening project which would add a third lane each direction from the bridge on the West Virginia line to Williamsport. This \$43M project was a welcome relief when announced at MDOT’s 2014 transportation tour.

While the community appreciated this first step, there was concern that the proposed scope of Phase 1 was insufficient, and not widening the interstate to the next major interchange at I-70 would create a safety concern and bottleneck for the area. The HEPMPO, our regional transportation oversight committee, drafted a letter to former MDOT Secretary Jim Smith asking MDOT to consider expanding the project and widen I-81 to the I-70 interchange. This major interchange would be a more logical and safer alternative to convert back to a 2-lane highway until the next phase could be completed. However, this expansion was denied, citing limited funds. A similar letter was sent to current Secretary Pete Rahn a year ago asking to extend the widening project to I-70, but again, the expansion was not included in the state’s most recent transportation plan citing limited funds.

Earlier this year, the Federal government passed the FAST Act transportation bill. This bill included a FASTLANE Grant program that allocated \$800M in 2016, and over \$5B over the next five years, for nationally significant freight and highway projects. Each state could apply for up to three projects annually, and if awarded, the grant would pay up to 60 percent of the costs. We were excited about this new revenue source as Pennsylvania Congressman Bill Shuster, chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee that helped craft the bill, has publicly stated that I-81 needs to be widened and is “exactly the type of roadway we’re talking about” when referencing the FAST Act’s emphasis on projects of national importance. In addition, I-81 is listed as one of the national rural freight highways and \$190M of the annual allotment is reserved specifically for projects in rural areas.

In March of this year GHC, the HEPMPO, County government, our State Delegation, and other private entities asked MDOT to apply for FASTLANE grant funds for I-81. However, the state chose to only apply for two urban projects, both located in Baltimore (Port Covington economic

development project and the Howard Street Tunnel improvement project). Last week, the preliminary announcements for FASTLANE grant awards were made and neither Baltimore project was funded. As a result, Maryland ended up without any new funding from the 2016 FASTLANE grant program.

Other states benefited from their applications including Louisiana, Arizona, and Wisconsin which both received large awards for highway widening projects strongly resembling what our community has requested for I-81. Louisiana received a \$60M grant to complete a 15-mile lane addition project to their major highway. Arizona received \$54M to add a 3<sup>rd</sup> lane to two sections of I-10 between Tucson and Phoenix to “make the corridor wider and safer for commuters and commercial traffic”. Wisconsin received \$40M to add a fourth lane on a 4-mile section of I-90/39. While we’ll never know how I-81 would have fared in the competitive bid process, it’s disappointing that our current administration not only failed to include I-81 as their third application, but also never publicly responded to our community as to why.

The two Baltimore projects are very worthy projects as they expand the amount of freight that can move by rail through the Port of Baltimore and bring jobs and private investment to revitalize a depressed area of the city. However, I-81 is equally worthy of consideration due to the vast movement of freight up and down the east coast, the new intermodal facility being built in Greencastle, the need to support existing businesses and attract new businesses along this corridor, as well as the need to improve safety and relieve congestion and from the high volumes of truck traffic. I-81 would also be eligible for funding from that portion of money reserved solely for rural projects, which the two Baltimore projects are not eligible for. Maryland can apply in 2017 for the next round of grant money (\$850M), and the administration has already stated they want to reapply for the Baltimore projects. We urge Governor Hogan to include widening I-81 on this list.

I-81 was designed for 15% truck traffic, yet the average daily truck traffic today is more than double that rate (34%). To put this in perspective, I-81 has double the rate of trucks than on I-95 (15%). This dangerous ratio of trucks to cars on a high-speed highway with substandard capacity has been the cause of numerous accidents as evidenced by the two incidents over the holiday weekend including the tragic fatality of another county resident. This is not new news to our state. Multiple public officials and reports have consistently point out the congestion problem over the last 20 years. In 2010, a State Highway Administration (SHA) report noted, “traffic conditions have deteriorated as the area has developed. Increase truck traffic and geometric deficiencies...have created merge and weave problems along the corridor contributing to a high number of crashes”. The Potomac River bridge expansion is a start, but this phase fails to account for the areas of highest need around the I-70, Halfway Blvd, US-40, and Salem Avenue interchanges.

Investments in public transportation infrastructure have proven to yield high returns. When I-81 was first built, distribution, manufacturing, and other industries sprang up along this north-south freight corridor, which have provided thousands of jobs to support area families. In more recent times, the State, Federal government, and County partnered on a \$62M runway expansion project at Hagerstown Regional Airport (HGR), and had significant success. Almost 1000 new jobs have been created, economic impact to our community doubled from \$50M per year in 2004 to over \$108M per year today, and state and local tax revenue has jumped to over \$8.4M per year. When the state and county invested in upgrading the Halfway Blvd/I-81 interchange the Valley Mall was re-energized and dozens of new businesses, hotels, and offices were built in this area drawing shoppers and visitors from all over the region, increasing state and local tax revenue.

GHC firmly believes that investments in I-81 will have similar returns. Unlike Maryland, West Virginia chose to aggressively improve their 14-mile section of the I-81 over the last 15 years, one phase at a time. By 2017, our neighboring West Virginia counties will have three lanes each direction across their 14 miles of the interstate to bolster their local economy. The facts clearly show this investment has paid great dividends. When comparing population growth from 2000 to 2015, population has increased in Jefferson County and Berkeley County 2-1/2 to 3 times the rate than in Washington County (+32%, +45%, +13% respectively). From 2001 to 2014, the job growth rate in these West Virginia counties has increased 3 to 4 times the rate of job growth in Washington County (+16.6%, +20.1%, +5.7% respectively). While there may be other contributing factors, West Virginia's investment in I-81 surely played a major role as evidenced by the recent announcement of the new \$500M/700 job Proctor & Gamble plant opening along I-81 in 2017.

Unlike Maryland, West Virginia has not used limited financial resources as an excuse for inaction. Keep in mind that WVDOT has nearly twice as many lane miles to manage than Maryland (35k vs. 18K). In addition, from 2008 to 2013, WV received 35% less Federal Highway Trust Fund money than Maryland (\$475M/yr. vs. \$645M/yr.). However, even with twice as many lane miles and a third less federal funding, multiple administrations have recognized the value of this investment and made it a priority for West Virginia and soon they will have the project completed. As a result they show prospective companies that they are open for business and are pulling from Maryland's share of the market.

Balancing the needs across a broad and diverse state is not easy, and we applaud Governor Hogan for the many positive things he has done to improve our great state during his first term including his support of various projects in Washington County. However, it's time for this administration to recognize the impact I-81 has on our local economy and the lives of our citizens and come up with a plan to widen I-81 in a reasonable timeframe. It took 15 years to get Phase 1 of this project approved after the planning and design was completed. It cannot take another 15 years to get the next phase on the books. The state is currently in the process of determining what new transportation projects will be included in next year's Consolidated Transportation Plan (CTP). We strongly urge Governor Hogan and MDOT Secretary Rahn to include Phase 2 of the I-81 widening project in the upcoming CTP to complete 3 lanes in each direction from the West Virginia line to the I-70 interchange. In addition we would ask that MDOT work with the County, our State Delegation, and our Federal Delegation to apply for and secure a FASTLANE grant in the coming funding cycle. Our community's livelihood and the lives of all that venture driving on I-81 depend upon it.

Chris Motz,  
GHC Chairman

*The Greater Hagerstown Committee is comprised of corporate and civic leaders from more than 65 local companies and organizations, employing over 10,000 people in Washington County. GHC is funded solely by member dues, and works collaboratively to be a catalyst for progress and growth in Washington County. For more information on GHC visit [www.GreaterHagertown.org](http://www.GreaterHagertown.org). Supporting documentation on the data used in this article was provided to the Herald Mail.*