

Stewards of the Potomac Highlands
P.O. Box 455, Wardensville WV 26851

April 27 2007

Mr. Gregory L. Bailey, P.E., Director, Engineering Div
WVDOT Div. Of Highways
State Capitol Bldg. 5
Charleston WV 25305 gbailey@dot.state.wv.us

Mr. Thomas J. Smith, Div. Administrator
Federal Highway Administration
Geary Plaza #200,
700 Washington St. E
Charleston WV 25301 henry.compton@fhwa.dot.gov

Dear Mr. Bailey and Mr. Smith:

Stewards of the Potomac Highlands is a nonprofit 501(c)(4) citizens' group aiming to preserve open spaces, forests, farmland, rural communities and towns and foster stewardship of the Potomac Highlands of West Virginia, Virginia and Maryland. We promote ways to make a living in our area without destroying our air, soil, water, wildlife and scenery. We encourage community and transportation planning for sustainable economic development which will protect the environment, discourage sprawl, and support family and community cohesion, local business, local history and culture.

These are our comments on the SFEIS for the Parsons to Davis section of Corridor H issued Feb 2, 2007.

1. The no-build alternative would better serve the purpose and need of bringing economic development to the region. The tiny towns of Davis, Thomas and Parsons benefit from the tourist traffic and will benefit less with a four-lane rushing people on by. The Improved Road Alternative would help traffic flow without destroying the area's valuable tourist and historic resources and views that tourists come to see. We ask that no-build and IRA be given more serious consideration, especially considering the cost of building anything in this challenging, mountainous, environmentally sensitive terrain through the Monongahela National Forest and near the Blackwater Falls State Park. WVDOH says the Corridor H purpose and need statement of 1996 requires a four-lane road from Parsons to Davis, but the cost and benefit of such a road, considering its destruction of the very resources that are the foundation of this particular section's outdoor and historic tourist economy, still must be questioned. Traffic increases projected on page I-11 are far below the 10,000 ADT that are usually indicative of the need for a four lane. The EIS, II-8 acknowledges the IRA would save time and travel distance over the current condition of Route 219 from 11.8 to 8.9 miles

2. The southern route of the ROPA completely cuts off the town of Thomas from the through traffic. A leading tourist businessman in Thomas, John Bright of the Purple Fiddle, took a position for the northern route in a public hearing (SFEIS Feb.2007, Parsons to Davis: Appendix A) in December 2002; Alternative IG was his preference. If the purpose is to help business, and the main business of the area is tourism, why did the Highway Department choose the southern route?

3. The original BA for the project indicated that northern Alternative 1 routes were less harmful than the southern Blackwater area routes to the habitat of the West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel, (*Glaucomys sabrinus fuscus*), the area's signature endangered species. The southern route, chosen for the ROPA, bisects much more flying squirrel habitat than the northern Alternative 1 Blackwater avoidance routes. "Habitat" as defined in the updated recovery plan for the squirrel issued in 2001 means not only sites where squirrels were actually trapped, but also likely places of suitable habitat. According to studies by Weigl, Loeb et al, Menzel et al, and Mitchell, a reliable guideline for habitat is presence of the fungus that the squirrels eat. Flying squirrels inhabit older growth hardwood areas as well as spruce and hemlock, and have been found in the Blackwater Canyon at an altitude as low as 2200 feet. However the EIS keeps relying on green spots of "known occupied habitat" and avoids the issue of bisecting a wide, sensitive

area of habitat. We also question the SFEIS emphasis on the distinction between “suitable” and “highly suitable” habitat, shown in Exhibit II-3, especially since the trapping evidence shows squirrels are inhabiting some areas merely classed as “suitable.”

4. The EIS gives, as the principal reason for eliminating the Alternative 1 northern routes, WVDOH's estimates of earthmoving borrow and waste. As Pam Moe's comment letter for Corridor H Alternatives on the December 2002 SFEIS points out, WVDOH estimates on Section 16, Elkins to Kerens, turned out to be three or four times too low. The response did not indicate how WVDOH has improved their estimating methodology for this section, but cited only the consultation process with other agencies. Alternative 1 variations were eliminated based on requirements for left turns. If WVDOH can build enormous bridges in Baker, Hardy County, and the planned span over the Blackwater on the southern ROPA route, they can safely address left turn situations on the northern routes of Alt. 1 while conserving wildlife habitat.

5. The EIS asserts, on page III-48, that the greatest effects on the squirrel would be during the first phase of construction. This statement fails to address a serious, longterm issue: bisecting of the habitat. The EIS says that new information about the West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel has been studied, but apparently this does not include the report of Weigl, et al, 2002, "Study of the northern flying squirrel populations along the Cherohala Skyway" which says the flying squirrels will not cross a road. No studies have been done directly for the West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or WVDOH as a follow-up to this report. The only other relevant study in the BO, by K. Vernes in 2001, shows that a related species in Canada glides an average of 16-82 feet and a maximum of 148 feet, which would make it impossible for them to “fly” across a four-lane. Weigl in studies in 1999 and 2002 notes the heavy skin flaps make crawling awkward for the Blackwater area flying squirrels, and paved roads are a magnet for their predators. The only evidence cited in the BO to refute Weigl is an unpublished 2002 letter from Dr. Edwin Michael to Snowshoe area landowner James Ham, saying that a Northern WV Flying Squirrel apparently crossed a cleared power line right of way—not a paved road.

The proposed bifurcations on the southern route around Middle Run will not preserve habitat. Since flying squirrels will not cross a road, the bifurcation instead will create a larger no-squirrels-land and isolate two small populations north of the route from mates and food sources, leading to the populations' possible extinction.

6. Additional pressures plague the flying squirrels these days, including global climate change, more mining, industrial wind turbine building, second home development, and timbering. Construction of a recent local cell phone tower, for example, usurped 10 acres of flying squirrel habitat. If a 4-lane Corridor H brings in more mining and timbering, these secondary effects would cause additional harm to squirrel habitat. We don't believe the EIS has given proper study to the cumulative and secondary impacts of Corridor H on the squirrel population, and for that matter, on other wildlife, streams and historic resources.

Because new information on flying squirrel habitat has yet to be examined, and because the EIS was not posted on the WVDOH website, we ask for a 90 day extension of the comment period to include and elaborate on the latest research on West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrels and any other related species. We incorporate by reference the April 23 2007 comments of Friends of Blackwater Canyon to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the proposed de-listing of the West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel from the endangered list. Those comments are attached to the email copy of this letter, not to the paper copy. Both Corridor H and the proposed de-listing, which would remove legal protections, are threats to this valuable animal and the interrelated issues need to be clarified.

We request that the final EIS be accessible electronically via the WVDOH Corridor H website. We also request that an email address or website be listed on the WVDOH and FHWA websites where the public can post comments. The web addresses also need to be listed on any further EIS paper documentation that is issued.

Stewards appreciates this opportunity to comment on the Corridor H Davis to Parsons EIS and we are interested in further coordination and comment on any section of Corridor H with the WVDOH. Please send notices to: Paul Burke, President; Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, P.O. Box 455, Wardensville WV 26851. We would appreciate receiving the six month Corridor H status reports at our post office box address.

Paul Burke, President
Stewards of the Potomac Highlands

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cc: US Fish and Wildlife Service wvnscomments@fws.gov
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