

# I-81 a key to economic growth in Blue Ridge

By MARY LAURENT

Transportation, after labor factors, is the most important consideration in attracting new industry. And in the Blue Ridge Region, the backbone of the transportation system is Interstate 81, the longest interstate in Virginia and one of the busiest in the U.S.

But I-81 is quickly becoming too small to accommodate the traffic wanting to travel quickly through. Already it is actually a two-lane road for passenger cars because the truck traffic is so much heavier than was originally anticipated.

How heavy? Initial estimates were for 10 to 12 percent of total traffic volume. Now that figure is more like 30 percent and ranges up to 50-60 percent at certain times, according to Ray D. Pethtel, former Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and acting director of Virginia Tech's Center for Transportation Research.

"Consider that one truck is about seven car lengths," says Laura Bullock of the Salem office of the VDOT. "If you add up all the trucks and multiply by seven, the volume on I-81 gets substantially higher."

On steep terrain like I-81, trucks require four times the road space of a car.



**Ken Anderson's Anderson & Associates of Blacksburg will help design I-81 upgrades**

That I-81 needs to be widened is not a question for debate. VDOT projects that by 2015, traffic on I-81 near Roanoke will total as much as 83,000 vehicles per day, compared with the current 50,000.

How I-81 needs to be widened, by how much, and at what locations is the dilemma, says Joe Orcutt at VDOT's transportation planning office. "Standards have changed since the early 1960s when the road was built," he says, adding that there are many design problems that need to be solved before wishful thinking

evolves into road construction.

"The gradient variations of I-81 are a challenge to designers," Orcutt says. "There are places where we can't widen to the outside, places where the median isn't wide enough even for more than two lanes. Some parts of I-81 will need more than one additional lane, some a lane going uphill but not downhill, and those places have yet to be determined."

VDOT has selected four consulting engineering firms to study widening I-81 based on traffic demand in the next 20 to 50 years. These are

Michael Baker Engineering for the southernmost stretch, HDR Engineering for the Blacksburg to Buchanan length, Anderson and Associates for 64 East to 64 West, and Hayes, Seay, Mattern & Mattern for Rt. 66 to Winchester. Each study is due to be completed late next year. Environmental assessments and right-of-way acquisitions must then be made before construction can begin.

"You are not going to see major widening activity until after the year 2000, and perhaps beyond," says Pethtel. The timetable for 81 widening in the high priority Christiansburg-Blacksburg area isn't planned until after 2000, according to the six-year plan of the Department of Transportation.

Two of the consultants — Michael Baker Engineers and Blacksburg's Anderson and Associates — are charged with conducting feasibility studies for intermodal transportation alternatives.

The transportation and distribution committee of the New Century Council (a group hoping to help influence future development) offered the idea of a "rail ferry" for the trucks which do not stop on the I-81 corridor. Trailers would be loaded onto a train in Knoxville and carted via the

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Norfolk Southern line parallel to I-81 to Hagerstown where they would reattach to a tractor. Pethel thinks that while this may alleviate some of the congestion caused by truck traffic, it doesn't negate the need to widen the road, as many industries along the corridor depend on just-in-time delivery of raw materials for efficient operation and distribution.

Pethel is the lead planner for a group of transportation centers in the vicinity of I-81 who will focus on the

needs of the corridor along with the entire U.S. length. These institutions are Virginia Tech, UVa, Penn State, the University of Pennsylvania and Rensselaer Polytech in New York. Transportation Centers in Maryland, Tennessee and West Virginia are also involved. The group met for the first time in Roanoke in June. A conference in Roanoke is planned to discuss strategic issues about the road from transportation, economic development and technology standpoints. Collaborative research projects include traveler information

needs of the road, impacts on neighboring communities and the definition of the corridor.

It's a basic tenet of capitalism that if you can't move goods and services, you won't be able to have sound economic development. I-81 has problems in that regard. But among VDOT, the Center for Transportation Research, and the New Century Council transportation team, it's safe to say that the future of I-81 will not be left to chance.

*(Mary Laurent is a Blacksburg-based freelance writer.)*