

# BUSINESS

## Blacksburg engineer works in Washington to make I-81 safer

Tim Stowe has become such an interstate booster that one transportation official calls him "Mr. 81."

By **PAUL DELLINGER**  
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**BLACKSBURG** — Tim Stowe wants to do something about Interstate 81's bad reputation.

"I've talked to people who are actually afraid to drive on Interstate 81," said Stowe, transportation and planning vice president at the consulting engineering firm of Anderson & Associates. "We want to do all we can to make 81 a safe road for everybody, and do it as quickly as possible."

For the past three years, Stowe has been working with members of Congress, environmental groups and the Federal Highway Administration to streamline the development of transportation projects. "It was taking anywhere from 10 to 12 years for the transportation projects to go from concept to fruition," he said.

As Transportation Committee chairman for the American Consulting Engineers Council — the nation's largest organization of engineers in private practice — he has testified before Senate subcommittees twice in two years. Recently he met with the assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

"My whole goal all along is: How do we take what I'm doing in D.C. and bring that home to help the I-81 project move along faster?" said Stowe, who has overseen about 100 miles of Anderson's engineering work on widening and improving Interstate 81.

Staunton Transportation District Administrator Dennis Morrison refers to him as "Mr. 81."

"Our whole economy out here is very dependent on 81 and, if we don't take care of 81,



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we're all going to suffer," Stowe said. "That's why moving these projects along as quickly as possible is important to me ... because, as I mentioned, 81's earning a reputation that we don't want it to have."

Last year Congress passed the Transportation Enhancement Act for the 21st Century, or TEA-21, which includes funding for national transportation and mass transit projects. It also contains language calling for process improvements, much of which had been pushed by Sen. John Warner, R-Va.

One provision would let transportation officials buy land from willing sellers for future projects rather than wait for completed design plans. This avoids having the land bought up by developers, making it more difficult and expensive to acquire later. "And obviously, once an area's developed, you have to go in and knock down buildings," said Stowe, who has

worked at Anderson since he graduated from Virginia Tech in 1988.

Stowe and other engineers are looking into ways for trucks to be loaded onto rail cars for parts of their runs. That could ease heavy truck traffic on Interstate 81, which was designed for 15 percent truck traffic when it was built 30 years ago. Now trucks make up 19 percent to 40 percent of the traffic, with higher levels in the New River Valley and the combined Interstate 81-77 segment around Wytheville, which sees 60,000 vehicles a day.

"We do that already," said Robert Martinez, assistant vice president for marketing with Norfolk Southern Corp. in Norfolk and Virginia former transportation commissioner. Thirteen percent of the NS rail traffic moves containers or truck trailers, he said.

With NS and CSX splitting the Conrail system on June 1,

that percentage could increase.

Historically, Martinez explained, Conrail had little interest in moving north-south truck traffic because its system ended near the Virginia-Maryland border and the freight would have to be transferred to NS or CSX for the longest part of the trip to major Southern markets. But now, Martinez said, such transfers can be done on one system.

Perhaps the main time-saver among Stowe's recommendations is streamlining environmental reviews by working with different agencies at the same time instead of one after another.

Highway projects come in three parts: the planning, which includes the environmental assessments and takes about six years, then the design and construction phases which take about two years each. The goal is to cut the planning part by

# Stowe

half, and combine design and construction under a design-build process with parts of each happening at the same time.

Stowe said this approach would not avoid any environmental requirements, but make them more efficient. "Preserving the environment is also important to us," he said. "We have not sought to alter any of the environmental laws or regulations."

Sometimes, delays happen because environmental agencies lack manpower. Under TEA-21, transportation funding can be channeled to ease staffing problems during peak workloads involving highway projects.

Virginia transportation officials must use tools made available through TEA-21 to speed up improvements to Interstate 81, he said. Otherwise, Stowe said, the Interstate 81 work may languish for another decade of increasing congestion and more lives lost in car-truck accidents.

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**TIM STOWE**

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"Many of the people I speak with here in the New River Valley are scared to drive on I-81 now. Imagine what it will be like 10 years from now," he said. "It is carrying more traffic now than it

ever has . . . and it's only going to continue to grow."

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