Citizen groups call for an end to the "Highway to Nowhere" project

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A new study by the Virginia Department of Transportation finds there is no operational need in Virginia for a four- to five-lane highway from the West Virginia state line to I-81 near Strasburg, confirming a decision the state made 30 years ago to not extend West Virginia's Corridor H into the commonwealth.

The study comes at a time when West Virginia officials plan to issue contracts to build the $542 million, 7.5-mile eastern-most segment of its highway from Wardensville, W.Va., across Great North Mountain and stop at the state line. Two citizen groups filed a federal lawsuit last month to block the project, saying it is unneeded and threatens natural and historic resources. They argue that state and federal highway agencies failed to consider less expensive and less harmful alternatives, and call for safety improvements to the existing two-lane Route 55 in West Virginia.

"VDOT's study affirms that this 'highway to nowhere' is utter folly," said Ellen Stuart-Haentjens, executive director of the Virginia Wilderness Committee. "Aside from the astronomical price tag, other costs include polluted drinking water supplies, degraded outdoor recreation assets, and ruined wildlife habitat, including some of the best native brook trout streams in this region." The highway would cut through 2.4 miles of the George Washington National Forest, potentially setting a precedent for further harmful development of the nation's protected public lands, she said.

"West Virginia's state and federal leaders need to stop throwing away taxpayer money on this boondoggle. We have urgent needs in West Virginia, which ranks among the worst in the country for safe roads and bridges," said Bonni McKeown, president of Stewards of the Potomac Highlands. "Given Virginia's position, the West Virginia Department of Highways

should consider spot safety improvements to Route 55 instead of building Corridor H."

A report from a national transportation organization last year found that one-third of West Virginia's major roads are in "poor or mediocre" condition, and the number of bridges rated "poor or structurally deficient" is the highest in the U.S.

The project would also threaten historic lands in Virginia. "Not only is Corridor H not needed in Virginia, as the VDOT study affirms, its construction would directly and negatively impact nationally significant historic properties in southern Frederick County and northern Shenandoah County,' said Kristen Laise, executive director of Belle Grove Plantation in Middletown. Belle Grove is a congressionally legislated partner in Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park.

Corridor H was envisioned in the 1970s as a 157-mile highway to run from I-79 to I-81. Since then, West Virginia has built much of its portion. Although the Virginia Commonwealth Transportation Board decided more than 30 years ago to not extend Corridor H, West Virginia now plans to build its remaining 7.5- mile segment from the small town of Wardensville east to the state line, where it would funnel traffic onto the two-lane Route 55 / 48, known as the John Marshall Highway.

In its study, VDOT looked at existing traffic and forecasts on Route 55 / 48 and found that conditions would remain acceptable for the next 100 years, even if doubling the traffic growth rate that West Virginia used to justify building its Wardensville segment. The agency concluded that "no operational recommendations are needed or proposed at this time."

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Organized in 1969, the Virginia Wilderness Committee (VWC) works to permanently protect the best of Virginia's wild places for future generations, foster understanding and appreciation of Wilderness, and promote enjoyment and stewardship of our last remaining wildlands.The Virginia Wilderness Committee is a 501(C)3 non-profit citizens' group. https://www.vawilderness.org/

Economically and culturally, our area has a proud tradition of small farm and forest ownership and historic towns. Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, a 501c4 nonprofit citizens group, networks in West Virginia's northeastern counties to protect this heritage and support an environmentally and socially sustainable, locally-controlled economy. https://potomachighlandstewards.org/