

Response to TDOT's virtual meeting format

This is a wholly inadequate platform for public learning and comment on the proposed new highway. The site is extremely confusing to navigate, assumes a degree of familiarity with digital communication that many residents do not have, ignores basic criteria for accessibility (visibility, manual dexterity, intuitive process, closed captions) in online communication and online access when we have a digital divide throughout Blount County regarding bandwidth and equipment. CAPPE spent hours developing supplemental materials to guide our members through TDOT's virtual meeting. TDOT should have waited until we can meet in person, have a public conversation and everyone could participate in the discussion.

Content of virtual meeting

TDOT continues to misrepresent what this project will do. TDOT's own studies, prepared after CAPPE filed a federal lawsuit requiring TDOT comply with federal law, show no improvement to congestion in the Maryville core and continuing poor conditions on area roads even with the PPE. In fact TDOT's studies show that many area roadways will have failing levels of service by 2040 even with the PPE.

Impacts of the proposed new highway

The project, which will affect the entire county (not only landowners along the route) is being heavily promoted by the Chamber of Commerce, an unelected organization that is shaping our community's future. Choosing where and how we want our community to grow is essential to maintain quality of life and the rural character of our county. The PPE will induce suburban sprawl all along its route and beyond. The simulated flyover shows the extreme impact the PPE would have on our rural terrain and farmland, with retaining walls, overpasses and access ramps. The traffic lights at the interchange on Sevierville Road and on US 321 make TDOT's travel time studies – which failed to demonstrate benefit of the PPE – obsolete. The new attention by proponents to air quality as a rationale for the PPE is one more example of their shifting emphasis whenever previous claims can't be supported with data. Air quality in our region is affected by coal-burning power plants and industrial emissions. Until we regulate tailpipe emissions, road projects are largely incidental to air quality – although we note that the addition of traffic lights on Sevierville Road and US 321 will cause idling.

Planning for our community's future

We need comprehensive land use planning that includes residential, commercial, industrial, and public sector development (such as schools) integrated with transportation planning. We must identify mutual interests across the cities and the entire county based on data (like origin and destination studies), instead of limiting our vision to piecemeal projects based on outdated assumptions. The public must be part of the development of visions, plans and policies for the 21st century.

We have to provide and pay for infrastructure (schools, roads, safety and services) wherever there is growth. Residential development does not generate enough revenue to pay for associated services. We need a robust public conversation about what we want our community to become, where and how we want to grow and how we will pay for it. One of Blount County's significant assets is its natural beauty and rural character. Do we want the entire county to look like West Knoxville?

CAPPE's position remains as it has been for decades. This project does not address real needs and wastes taxpayer funds that could better be spent elsewhere. We doubt anyone promoting the PPE has read the Environmental Impact Statement and TDOT's studies about the impacts of this new highway. We have read all of them. Proponents of the PPE are stuck in a time warp, holding onto assumptions that have never been proven. In contrast, CAPPE advocates responsible transportation planning for our community that will sustain quality of life for all of us.