



Alternate Routes

BY JOHN MANUEL, BARRY YEOMAN AND BOB HALL

© 1992 by *The Independent* and the Institute for Southern Studies



In 1991, the state of Maine decided it wanted to reduce congestion along its major north-south corridor. The government's response was predictable: add another lane to the Maine Turn-

pike at a cost of \$100 million.

But Maine's citizens were not convinced that widening the turnpike was the best expenditure of the state's scarce funds—particularly at a time when the state was running a \$1.2 billion deficit. They wanted the state to give priority to maintaining existing roads and seriously examine other solutions to traffic congestion. Under the banner of the Campaign For Sensible Transportation, a coalition of more than 40 citizen groups banded together to oppose the widening. And they didn't stop there.

The coalition proposed an initiative to overhaul the entire state transportation system. The measure, put to the voters in a referendum, not only stopped the turnpike widening; it also required state officials to take a hard look at alternatives to every highway project. And it gave citizens a stronger voice in the transportation planning and decision-making process.

The act was put on the ballot last November. Highway contractors fought the measure tooth and nail. The governor, most of the state legislature and more than 100 business groups also urged voters to defeat the referendum. Outspent 4-1, the Campaign for Sensible Transportation seemed headed for certain defeat.

But Maine voters stood up to the lobbyists and politicians. By a 59-41 percent margin, they approved one of the most comprehensive transportation reform laws in the country.

"We can claim this as a victory for people who understand the impact of highways," said Kristin Coombs, chair of the Maine Transportation Coalition. "Maine's economy is critically linked to its forests, coastline, farmlands and unique town structures—all of which are directly threatened by the malignant growth that generally accompanies highway development."

This sweeping legislation stands in marked contrast to the situation in North Carolina. For the past four weeks, *The Independent* has documented how the roadbuilding system in this state gives undue power to a Board of Transportation composed of major political

campaign contributors. The result is highway projects that:

- waste millions of tax dollars in a time of tight budgets;
- allow big donors to reward themselves and their friends;
- subvert environmental laws and other regulations;
- ignore community input, even from local elected officials;
- override planners and other professionals, even those inside the Department of Transportation (DOT); and
- displace communities in order to help big donors.

In response to the series, DOT has failed to refute a single fact, preferring instead to call names. "It's just the work of the left-wing attack media from hell," Transportation Secretary Thomas Harrelson told the *Winston-Salem Journal*.

But Billy Rose, who administered the state's highway program for 12 years, estimates that unneeded roads built because of "political favoritism or just plain old greed" waste between \$50 million and \$100 million each year.

Indeed, over the past four weeks, *The Independent* has cited more than a dozen road projects that were designed or rerouted to help big-money campaign donors or high-ranking politicians. The waste on those roads alone will cost taxpayers more than \$11 million. Two weeks ago, *The News & Observer* documented yet another case: a \$9.1 million exit ramp that funnels I-40 drivers directly into a Greensboro mall and hotel complex developed by a major fund-raiser for Gov. Jim Martin.

Only a full state audit will determine the scope of the waste at DOT. Still, reform can take place—and Maine voters showed it can happen even in a rural and conservative state.

In the accompanying articles, we look at two important ingredients for meaningful transportation reform: citizen action and local planning. In "Moving Mountains," we travel to the North Carolina mountains and meet a group of citizens who are trying to wrest highway decisions away from big-money political contributors. In "We Can Get There," we explore what must happen at a local level to create a new transportation system in the Triangle—one that combines single-passenger cars with buses, trains, bicycles and carpools.

Below, we look at the changes that must take place on a state level, both to increase the influence of ordinary citizens and to reform transportation policy. Based on interviews with local planners, elected officials, state government professionals, DOT staff members and out-of-state transportation experts, here is a

list of reforms that make sense for North Carolina:



1 Reduce the influence of political money

Under the current system, major campaign donors sitting on the Board of Transportation decide how DOT spends taxpayer money. The system is a closed circle: wealthy contributors give the cash a candidate for governor needs to win; the winner returns the favor with appointments, contracts and special access to bureaucrats or resources that help the rich get richer.

It's a vicious cycle that purposely excludes ordinary people, except to pay the bills. Voters sense they're being ripped off, and they rebel by boycotting elections. But as long as they pay their taxes, their silence only hurts themselves.

What can be done to bust through this circle of cash and cynicism? The solution lies in a twofold strategy that pushes out private patrons, while pulling in voters.

One practical step: North Carolina should follow Kentucky's lead in reducing the amount an individual or political action committee (PAC) can give a candidate, from the current limit of \$4,000 per election to \$500. The contributor's occupation or economic interest should also be revealed. Gifts from children, "bundling" and other ways of funneling larger donations to candidates should be banned.

More than a dozen states now offer tax money to qualifying candidates who agree to limit campaign spending. Even in the short run, a taxpayer-financed election system saves money because it diminishes the need for politicians to reward donors with million-dollar roads or billion-dollar bailouts. It also enhances people's sense of their ownership of the government.

In the South, Florida and Kentucky recently established public funds for major statewide races. For example, a gubernatorial candidate who raises \$600,000 in Kentucky can get \$1.2 million in matching funds; but the candidate can't spend more than the \$1.8 million total, must participate in public debates and can't award non-competitive contracts to companies whose employees gave a total of more than \$5,000 to the campaign.

North Carolina already has an election fund, but it's too poor to be effective. Instead of depending on voluntary contributions, the fund should be enriched by imposing fees on the activities of PACs, parties, lobbyists and candidates who don't agree to strict spending limits—methods other states already use. More

money must come from the general revenue fund.

Minnesota and Wisconsin have two of the best systems for publicly financing campaigns; they also rank as two of the top five states in voter turnout. The others in the top five allow voters to register by mail, on election day, or when they renew their driver's license. North Carolina could improve its miserable standing in voter turnout (46th in 1988) if it permitted mail-in, last-minute and "motor-voter" registration. Similar techniques to expand voter activism would also make politicians (and public policies) serve ordinary people, rather than wealthy special interests.

2 Take politics out of the Board of Transportation

The Board of Transportation is one of the most powerful bodies in state government. It has almost total control over state transportation policy, making the final decisions about which highway projects are funded and in what order.

At the same time, the board is one of the most political bodies in state government. Of its 24 members, 22 are appointed by the governor. Historically, governors have filled the board with wealthy campaign contributors. Many of these members have clear business interests in road construction. Of the current members, 18 own real estate, one sells petroleum and another runs a construction company and co-owns a trucking firm. Still another manages an automobile dealership.

To take politics out of our transportation decisions, the Board of Transportation must be eliminated or reformed. Eliminating the board would put transportation decisions in the hands of professionals whose job it is to design such projects. Of the 15 Southern states, six have no boards of transportation.

However, eliminating the board could put too much power in the hands of highway engineers, whose solutions too often involve drawing straight lines from Point A to Point B. What's more, it would leave local citizens without representation at DOT.

A more modest reform would be simply to overhaul the board. Currently, the only requirement for board members is that they come from each of 14 districts across the state. There are no requirements to include planners, environmentalists, community activists, public transit advocates, wetlands biologists, air-quality specialists or local officials.

At a minimum, seats should be set aside for these groups, who have a stake in our transportation system and expertise to share. In addition, the law should allow no more than one-third of the board members to have even an indirect financial interest in highway construction.

Such requirements exist for other state boards here in North Carolina. The Coastal Resources Commission, for example, sets aside seats for a conservationist, a marine ecologist, a commercial fisher and two local officials,

among others. This does not guarantee that these interests will prevail, but it helps to break up a board's clubhouse atmosphere and ensure that voices representing other societal concerns are heard.

3 Pass a Comprehensive Transportation Act

In 1991, five North Carolina environmental groups came up with a "Budget for a Green Assembly," which called for a reordering of state transportation priorities. The Green Budget proposed a repeal of the 1989 Highway

Trust Fund law, with its \$9 billion for roadbuilding and almost nothing for public transit. In its place, the conservation groups proposed a new Comprehensive Transportation Act that would focus on maintaining existing highways, bridges, railroads and bikeways. Further, the act would give public transit preference over the expansion of the intrastate highway system.

Such a law would bring North Carolina in line with other forward-thinking states that have revamped their transportation policies. Maine's new law gives priority to non-construction alternatives such as traffic management and public transit. Florida has limited interstate highway-building in favor of rail



The influence of cash on elections can be reduced with a series of reforms already working in other states.
PHOTO BY WERBY WALSH

GET INVOLVED

There are two ways you can help hold DOT accountable to ordinary citizens:

- Blow the whistle if you know of other cases like the ones documented in this series—times when taxpayer money has been wasted on roads for big campaign contributors or their friends. Write "Highway Robbery," *The Independent*, P.O. Box 2690, Durham, N.C. 27715. Or call (919) 286-1972.

- Join a new statewide organization, which has come together to reform DOT and stop waste; reorder the state's spending priorities; and work toward a sensible transportation system.

For more information, send this coupon to Transportation Reform, P.O. Box 938, Yadkinville, N.C. 27055. Or call (919) 679-8745.

Yes! Keep me informed.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

transit and carpool lanes. And Oregon has passed a sweeping law that integrates transportation, land-use planning, energy efficiency and environmental protection.

As part of a Comprehensive Transportation Act, the state should consider removing the funding wall between highways and everything else. Currently, the Department of Transportation is funded by two pools of money, which are separate from the rest of the state budget. The legislature cannot easily shift money from highways to schools. The original intent was to protect schools from being raided by roads; in reality, the wall protects roads more than it protects schools. As legislators have tried to scrounge up more money for education in recent years, "raiding" the Highway Trust Fund has been considered off-limits.

The state also needs to take a hard look at whether it really needs \$9 billion to meet its needs over the next 20 years. The current Highway Trust Fund was passed with no serious cost-benefit analysis. The legislature never debated alternative transportation solutions. Nor did it study the relative economic benefits of putting those funds into other programs such as education.

In fact, neither the legislature nor DOT has made the case that a dollar spent on roadbuilding is a wiser economic investment than the same dollar spent on education. While one 1988 UNC-Charlotte study called roadbuilding a "central" way to generate jobs, other research has yielded opposite results.

In a report done for the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, UNC researchers Edward Bergman and Gunther Maier said the link between roads and personal income is weak at best—and highway construction could actually *hurt* income growth in 39 North Carolina counties. By contrast, Bergman and Maier discovered a strong link between education and personal income.

Another computer analysis, by UNC-Chapel Hill graduate student David Cristeal, showed that bypasses around North Carolina towns have had "little effect on the overall economic health of communities."



Establish a new source of public transit funds

At the turn of the century, trolleys and streetcars ran regularly through the streets of Raleigh, Durham and other North Carolina cities. Now that we need them most, the public transit systems in most cities are shells of their former selves. Planners say that if North Carolina hopes to reduce traffic congestion, comply with air quality standards and provide equal access to jobs and services, it must expand public transportation.

Local, state and federal funds are available to purchase buses, trains and rails. However, the greatest expense for transit systems is in operation and maintenance. Historically, rider fares have not been sufficient to operate these systems. They must be supported by other sources, just as highways are subsidized by tax revenues.

There are two avenues for funding public transit. One possibility is a statewide fund. Rep. Paul Luebke (D-Durham) has proposed dedicating 15 cents of every dollar of the state gasoline tax to public transit. Massachusetts is now using this method to create a more efficient transportation system.

Another option is to encourage local and regional governments to create their own sources of funds. In other states, local governments use gasoline taxes, toll booths, license registration fees and parking fines as sources of transit operating funds. Sen. Howard Lee (D-Chapel Hill), Rep. Peggy Stamey (D-Raleigh) and eight other legislators have introduced a measure allowing cities and counties to set aside property taxes for public transportation without calling a referendum.



Make DOT more accountable to the environment

Few human activities have as much impact on the environment as building roads. Highways pave vast amounts of open space, cut off wildlife migration routes and often increase air pollution and energy consumption. What's more, state-funded roads in North Carolina are subject to less stringent environmental controls than federal highways.

In Part 2 of our series, we documented the ways the Department of Transportation walks right at the edge of environmental regulations—sometimes to help big campaign contributors.

We discovered that DOT sometimes makes decisions before studying the environmental damage caused by particular roads; fails to study long-term impacts of roads; switches from federal to state funding to avoid tough regulations; and studies roads in small segments, which makes it impossible to understand the full environmental damage those roads can cause.

The following recommendations would go a long way to lessening the environmental damage done by highways:

- Before deciding that a road is the solution to a transportation problem, DOT should consult with both state and federal environmental agencies. Currently, these agencies are consulted too late in the process to bring other alternatives into serious consideration.

The legislature also needs to ensure that these environmental agencies have enough funding to monitor the state's massive highway program in a timely fashion.

- State environmental regulations should be brought up to federal standards. This will eliminate the state's ability to avoid meeting tough federal regulations by switching to state funding for certain highway projects.

- Before DOT decides to build a road, it must consider the environmental impact of the *entire* project—regardless of when individual segments may be built. It must also consider long-term impacts, such as development drawn to the road and air pollution caused by increased traffic. And it must keep an open mind—open even to the possibility of shelving the project completely—until the environmental studies are completed.



6 Take action—now

Unlike Maine citizens, who voted to stop the turnpike widening, North Carolinians cannot put burning questions onto the ballot. Since there is no referendum process here, reforming the state transportation system has to come in other ways. Here are some immediate steps that can be taken:

- The state auditor should undertake a comprehensive audit of the state Department of Transportation—to determine how many millions of dollars are spent building and re-routing roads to benefit campaign contributors. The audit should look at other wasteful spending as well, along with DOT's compliance with environmental laws.

- The legislature should create a study commission to study transportation reform. This task force should make a special effort to talk to all the people interested in roadbuilding—not just road contractors and real-estate developers, but also neighborhood associations, state and federal regulators, conservation groups and people who use bicycles, buses, carpools and trains. The study commission should come back with a list of recommended bills for the General Assembly to consider.

- The General Assembly should abolish the Joint Legislative Highway Oversight Committee and replace it with a panel that has teeth. The current committee is stacked with road boosters who lob softball questions at DOT officials during their monthly meetings.

- Citizens across North Carolina must come together to press for reform. For years, individual communities affected by road projects have fought fragmented (and usually losing) battles. All those separate groups need to coalesce and focus their energies into a concerted statewide effort.

In fact, a statewide coalition has recently begun forming. This month, citizens from Blowing Rock to Pleasant Hill met to launch a transportation-reform network. The organization is still in its embryonic phase, and it still needs to shape its message and build broad support (see "Get Involved").

- North Carolinians also need to put transportation reform on this fall's political agenda—from the governor's race down to the state legislature and county commissioner races. The current system, with its tilt toward influential political insiders, does not have to be this way—but change can only occur if the voters, and courageous political leaders, take a stand. ■



Moving Mountains

BY BARRY YEOMAN



he diamond-shaped sign on the wall says, "DO NOT YIELD."

Cartoons and news clippings hang throughout the three cluttered rooms in the basement of an old brick building. There are maps of nuclear transport routes and national forests; old telephones and a fax machine; a repairman fixing the computers and a group meeting around a conference table. A sign over one door says, "No good deed goes unpunished."

Welcome to the Asheville headquarters of the Western North Carolina Alliance (WNCA), one of the state's most unrelenting voices for transportation reform. While citizens across the state have started talking about how to hold the Department of Transportation more accountable, alliance members have been working on that issue since 1989—and their efforts are starting to pay off.

Creating a forward-looking transportation policy for North Carolina will take more than a change in the bureaucracy. It will take a broad-based citizen movement. WNCA's successes and mistakes over the past three years show that ordinary citizens can make a difference—with foresight, patience and dogged work.

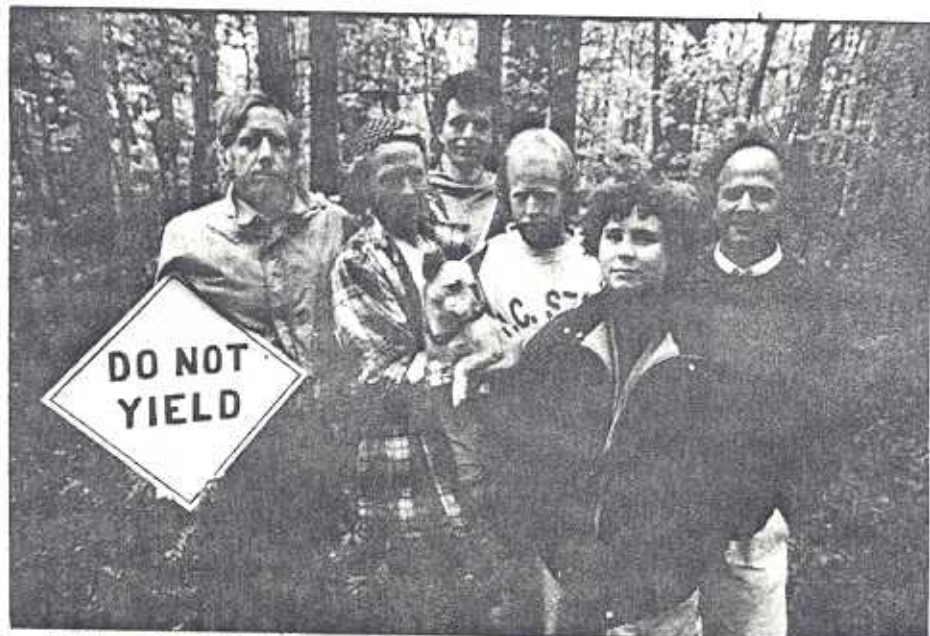
While other citizen groups in North Carolina attract members who oppose individual highways, the 700-member alliance draws its support from people with broader visions about the stewardship of the Earth. WNCA wants to educate North Carolinians that there are creative solutions to the state's transportation needs—alternatives to endless roadbuilding.

"It relates to our energy use. It relates to global warming. It relates to all the worldwide issues," says alliance chair Monte Cunningham. "More roads would make us more dependent on the automobile. We are moving in ways that could make our environment collapse."



ounded in 1982 to protect national forests from clear-cutting, the Western North Carolina Alliance has grown into a regional group with seven chapters and a broad environmental mission.

Highways barely made it onto WNCA's original agenda. Then DOT went public with a plan to build a new interstate highway called I-26 from Asheville to the Tennessee line. The new road, touted as a way to move traffic faster and more safely through the mountains, will cost taxpayers at least \$140 million.



Even if I-26 gets built, the WNCA has stirred up a new awareness of highway issues. L-R: Rusty Svils, Brownie Newman, John McBride, Jesse Jones, Laura Deaton and Chris Walters. PHOTO BY M.J. SHARP

The I-26 story has many of the same elements of the other roads in *The Independent's* "Highway Robbery" series. The road has been promoted by a group of developers, truckers, corporate executives and elected officials who have contributed \$12,975 to Gov. Jim Martin's campaigns. Politicians and business leaders say it will attract industry and stimulate Madison County's depressed economy. DOT considers the road essential, because Tennessee plans to build its own leg up to the state line. And while many local residents support the road, others have resigned themselves to a freeway cutting through their mountains.

At the same time, alliance members say I-26 could be an environmental disaster. The road would gouge nearly 300 feet out of Bucker Gap, making it the deepest mountain cut in North Carolina. It would pollute pristine mountain streams and level more than 1,300 acres of forest.

In addition, the new road would cut off the migration route of the black bear. Currently, bears travel long distances throughout the Southern Appalachian mountains. They mate with other bears from across the region, keeping the gene pool diverse and healthy. But interstate highways act as barriers, cutting off the bears' path and weakening the gene pool.

As *The Independent* went to press, the state had not completed its environmental studies for the project. Even though local residents and

state officials have long considered the highway a done deal, federal and state law bars DOT from making a road decision before it knows the full extent of the environmental damage the highway will cause. That means I-26 could still be stopped—but even the alliance holds out little hope for that.



ecause WNCA had little experience fighting roads, the state's plans to build I-26 came as a surprise. As a result, the alliance jumped into the discussions late—and by that time, pro-highway forces had already mobilized.

The I-26 Corridor Association, as the highway boosters called themselves, had convinced Gov. Martin and DOT that the state needed to build a whole new interstate, rather than widening the existing road. At the Highway Building in Raleigh, the I-26 files are filled with letters from the Corridor Association—urging the state to build the road as quickly as possible.

"Pressure can move it up," Corridor Association co-chair Louis Bissette Jr. once told an economic development board in Tennessee.

WNCA began its campaign to stop the road in 1989—writing to newspapers and state officials, educating local citizens, attending meetings. But with the highway already on a fast track, alliance members decided they needed to shift their strategy.

"Because we're so late, it's hard to make stopping I-26 our goal," says WNCA community organizer Laura Deaton. "What we've tried to do [instead] is raise public awareness in Madison County and make sure the environmental impact statement is well-done."

So in addition to its other tactics, the alliance began calling Greiner Inc., the consulting firm working to produce the Environmental Impact Statement. WNCA staffers telephone Greiner regularly—sometimes once a week. "I think we kept Greiner on their toes," says Deaton. "The documentation in North Carolina being done is so superior to Tennessee."

For instance, WNCA convinced the consultants to look at the impact I-26 would have on bear migration—something Greiner originally didn't plan to do. "Because there was such a concern, we tried to collect any possible bit of information we could," says Elaine Illes, Greiner's project manager. "We've tried to listen to what they say, because most of their concerns are legitimate." Illes adds that WNCA also deserves "part of the credit" for some design changes to protect water quality.

Some alliance members still hold out hope that they can stop the highway—a prospect that both DOT and the consultants call impossible. By challenging the environmental studies, WNCA hopes to delay the process—and give itself more time to build opposition. "We're trying to slow down this road until people recognize they're destroying their ability to live," says Monte Cunningham.



Even if I-26 gets built, which is likely, the alliance's struggle has stirred up a new awareness of transportation issues in Western North Carolina. And it has taught members how to confront the next highway that threatens to rip up the mountains. Taking a cue from their pro-highway opposition, alliance members now read the state's long-range Transportation Improvement Plan thoroughly. They'll know next time to get involved early in the process, get their coalition in place, and become even more relentless about getting information and expressing their opinions.

"Just asking the questions can bring more results than you might expect," says Laura Deaton.

They know now that reforming the transportation system is a long, painstaking struggle that requires a big-picture view. Now the alliance has started shifting its focus from I-26 to a whole constellation of "ill-conceived, short-sighted highway projects." It has taken DOT to task for cutting the public out of the decision-making process. And it has tried to convince state officials to rethink their commitment to the \$9 billion Highway Trust Fund, with its single-minded emphasis on roadbuilding.

This spring, WNCA brought together local citizen groups and national activists for a two-day conference on alternatives to roadbuilding. That weekend, people from Hendersonville to New Bern learned about the politics of highways—and learned strategies to bring back to their own communities.

While I-26 will likely get built, "I don't really feel frustrated, because I learned a lot from it," says Chris Walters, who chairs WNCA's Transportation Task Force. "To me, it's like the Vietnam War. I just want to be on record against it." ■

For more information, contact Western North Carolina Alliance, P.O. Box 18087, Asheville, N.C. 28814 or call (704) 258-8737.

STEAMROLLER OF THE WEEK



For his bare knowledge of bear migration, highway engineer E.D. Walker wins this week's Steamroller Award.

Last November, the Western North Carolina Alliance wrote to the federal government, voicing its concern about the effect I-26 would have on black bear movement. The alliance asked whether the state DOT could construct special crossings to allow the bears to pass under the freeway.

When DOT received a copy of the letter, Walker fired off a memo to Secretary Thomas Harrelson. "These folks want the I-26 route to have bear tunnels or bridges. What type of signing would be needed to direct the bears to

the bridges and tunnels. I'm not sure any of them except 'Smoky' can read," Walker wrote.

In fact, Florida has planned its highways to allow panther migration, while Colorado has allowed for bear travel. Walker would have known that—had he read the alliance's letter more carefully.