



U.S. Congressman

**Nick Rahall**

*WORKING FOR WEST VIRGINIANS*

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## **RAHALL ON SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA ROAD PROPOSALS**

**PRINCETON, WV --** In an address before a meeting of the Shawnee Parkway Association held in Princeton this evening, U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV) outlined his views on southern West Virginia road initiatives. His remarks follow in their entirety.

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I would like to take this opportunity to state, very clearly, my position on the various road proposals being promoted here in southern West Virginia. There have been several reports in the press expressing a concern that the proposed Shawnee Parkway, and the effort to improve Route 52 from Bluefield to Huntington, often referred to as the King Coal Highway with the portion running along with Tug Fork between Williamson and Kenova known as the Tolsia Highway, are in competition with each other.

The fact of the matter is that improving Route 52 and constructing the Shawnee Parkway is not an either or situation. Plainly stated, these two initiatives are not in competition with each other.

Route 52 is an existing primary road for which the State of West Virginia is responsible for maintaining. Each year, the State receives an allocation of money from the federal Highway Trust Fund to use to construct, improve and maintain what are known as primary and secondary roads. This federal funding is currently about \$113 million per year.

The federal government does not dictate which specific primary roads receive these funds. Rather, it is completely in the State's discretion as to which roads are to be improved with its annual allocation of federal highway funds. For any given project, the federal share is 75% and the state's share is 25%. As an aside, I would note that the same procedure is used for interstate highway construction and maintenance as well, except that the federal share is 90% due to the national significance of the interstate highway system.

The Shawnee Parkway proposal, on the other hand, as incorporated into legislation that I have introduced, is an entirely different project. It would be a national scenic parkway, under the administration of the National Park Service rather than the State. The reason why special legislation is necessary for the Shawnee is that being a national parkway under the jurisdiction of an agency of the federal rather than state government, it could not receive funding under the normal annual allocation of monies to West Virginia from the federal Highway Trust Fund. Under the bill, the federal government would put up 80% of the project's cost with money out of the Trust Fund while the State would have to purchase the right-of-way and donate it to the federal government. In addition, the State would be responsible for 20% of all construction costs.

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It should also be noted that I have likened the Shawnee to the Blue Ridge Parkway simply because the Blue Ridge is an existing national scenic parkway under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. This does not mean that I am proposing the Shawnee is to be a two-lane roadway. The bill makes no such stipulation. The exact routing and design of the Shawnee would be up to the State with input from the public.

I also strongly support upgrading and improving Route 52. This is a commercial route and it is crucial to the economic viability of southern West Virginia. Moreover, the State of West Virginia, if it so chooses, can make improvements to Route 52 through the use of its annual allocation of monies from the federal Highway Trust Fund. Obviously, however, the consideration here is whether the State is in the position to defer work on other roads in order to prioritize Route 52. This is a matter which only the State Division of Highways can answer. Moreover, there is an incentive for the State to upgrade Route 52. Back in the 1983 federal highway bill I authored an amendment aimed at facilitating improvements on energy impacted roads. With all the heavy coal traffic on Route 52, under my amendment at West Virginia's request the federal government could provide for 85%, rather than the normal 75%, share of the costs. This is an avenue that I have already asked the State to consider pursuing.

For my part, I will do all that I can to support the effort to gain improvements to Route 52. But these must be sensible improvements fully supported by all of those along the road. For example, I do not think people would endorse any proposal that would cause the massive condemnation of homes and businesses along Route 52. The extent of the upgrade must be carefully thought out in order to avoid displacing people and divesting them of their property. I will also do what I can to assist with the Shawnee Parkway. And, for that matter, any other viable road proposal such as the one known as the Gateway To The South, which would run from Beckley to Grundy, Virginia. In addition, I am committed to continuing my assistance to the proposed New River Parkway extension through Mercer County so that it would have interstate access at both ends -- I-64 to the North and I-77 to the South.

In all respects, road initiatives must have the support of the State government. While some initial cost estimates have been generated by the State for the Shawnee Parkway and the Beckley to Grundy roadway, it is my understanding that the Division of Highways has committed \$2.75 million to a feasibility location study for southern West Virginia roads that will start soon. This will be an extremely important study, and its outcome will most certainly have an effect on our course of action.

I will certainly work within the context of the federal highway program reauthorization legislation to be considered by the Congress next year to promote roads in southern West Virginia. We will have completed the Interstate System nationwide and I believe that Congress will give serious consideration to building a new system of interstate connectors. Roadways that fill gaps in the existing system. I also think that the concept of building more scenic parkways like the Shawnee is gaining national momentum. And, we may be able to bolster West Virginia's annual allocation so that the State will be in a better position to make the type of improvements to Route 52 that we would all like to see.

In conclusion, I would leave you with one message: The fact of the matter is that we, in southern West Virginia, all of us, are in this together. It is irresponsible for anybody to try to make political hay by attempting to provoke regional and community rivalries on these road proposals. This sort of tactic provides no public benefit. It will not accomplish anything of good. It is a disservice to the people of southern West Virginia and I simply will not be part of it. This is something that William Sanders has preached as well and I commend him for it.

There is a lot of common sense in the adage "United we stand, divided we fall." For if we are to make any headway on these proposals we must strive for a common front. We must all work together; citizens, local and state governments. This type of cooperation will be essential to the type of assistance I will be able to provide from the federal level.

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