

Gov. Jim Justice is known for having a lot to say during his State of the State addresses.

But during his final such address that lasted over 85 minutes on Jan. 10, Justice was succinct when expressing his wish for Corridor H.

"Finish it," Justice said.

A four-lane highway starting at Weston and planned to connect with Interstate 81 in Strasburg, Virginia, Corridor H has been billions of dollars in the making.

In 2020, the West Virginia Department of Transportation estimated \$1.93 billion had been spent on the road with \$1.1 billion more projected to complete.

But even though state officials have pegged the highway as 90% finished, a long road remains for wrapping up the final 10%.



West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice, flanked on his left by Department of Transportation Secretary Jimmy Wriston, shovels ceremonial dirt during a groundbreaking event in Tucker County for a section of Corridor H from Kerens to Parsons in this June photo. Environmental, legal and logistical objections with unfinished segments of Corridor H have intensified in recent weeks.

Courtesy photo

Environmental and other safety concerns have intensified in recent weeks over unfinished portions of the road in Tucker and Hardy counties, with community advocates questioning not only the direction of those segments but the wisdom of finishing them at all.

"This project will have economic, environmental, and other ripple consequences, decades—indeed, centuries—into the future," Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, an environmental group that works in West Virginia's northeastern counties, said in a Nov. 13 letter to state and federal transportation officials.

The group objected to state plans for a 6.8-mile segment from Wardensville in Hardy County to the Virginia state line.

## Fresh opposition to Corridor H development

In a Dec. 19 reply letter, the Federal Highway Administration said it would consider the group's [call for a new environmental impact statement](#) in a FHWA and state DOT reevaluation of a 2003 federal approval of the Wardensville-to-Virginia state line segment.

The agencies are preparing an environmental assessment that will determine whether an environmental impact statement, a more in-depth assessment, is warranted.

Also on Dec. 19, environmental and legal concerns with another unfinished segment of Corridor H from Parsons to Davis in Tucker County surfaced during a state Department of Environmental Protection meeting.

The virtual DEP meeting was to take public questions and input on a proposed permit modification for engineering company Greenman-Pedersen — a national firm that operates in Scott Depot — to controversially support core drilling for Corridor H in the Monongahela National Forest.

The DOT has said exploratory core borings are needed to confirm the feasibility of construction at proposed locations, proceed with further slope designs and understand geology beneath the future roadway.

But the United States Forest Service has not yet decided whether to grant a special use permit to allow work within the Monongahela National Forest. The Forest Service is still two to three weeks away from a decision, Forest Service spokesperson Franklin Pemberton said Tuesday, citing Monongahela National Forest officials.

DEP spokesperson Terry Fletcher said Wednesday the agency hasn't made a final determination on Greenman-Pedersen's permit modification proposal.

The DEP's meeting last month underscored that Corridor H's route to get from Parsons to Davis is also undetermined.

Travis Long, director of the DOT Division of Highways' technical support unit, said during the meeting the agency would hold a public meeting to present the agency's preferred alignment for the 10-mile stretch between Parsons and Davis and a northern route still being modeled.

Environmental groups and many local business owners and residents want officials to route the corridor north of Parsons, fearing the state's preferred route would compromise the Blackwater River Valley landscape and plague with truck traffic the Tucker County city of Thomas and other communities.

The DOH and Federal Highway Administration resolved to develop a notice of intent for a supplemental environmental impact statement to include a "Blackwater Avoidance Alternative" for the 10-mile stretch.



Travis Long, director of the West Virginia Division of Highways' technical support unit, speaks during a 2022 agency video on plans for the Parsons-to-Davis segment of Corridor H. Long assured his agency would guard against adverse environmental impacts from proposed core drilling for Corridor H in the Monongahela National Forest, drawing skepticism from plan opponents.

Division of Highways video screenshot

DOH spokesperson Jacob Flatley said Wednesday the division hadn't yet scheduled a meeting to present both alignments, a move he said wouldn't come until after the notice is published in the Federal Register.

## "Highway to nowhere"

A day after Justice's State of the State demand to get Corridor H done, the Governor's Office announced the state had committed allotting another \$22.9 million for the project in the form of a bid award to Upshur County-based J.F. Allen Company to pave a 3.3-mile section from U.S. Route 219 to an interchange with West Virginia Route 72.

But as West Virginia officials keep investing money and time into the highway, criticism persists that it's a road to nowhere.

In 1995, the Virginia Commonwealth Transportation Board chose not to proceed with plans to build Corridor H in Virginia after receiving significant public opposition to the project. No further study or development work has been done for Corridor H in Virginia since that time, Virginia Department of Transportation spokesperson Marshall Herman said Tuesday.

The Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley, a northern Virginia-based conservationist group, called for a new environmental impact statement for the Wardensville-to-Virginia Corridor H segment in a Nov. 13 letter to the Division of Highways.

The group reported “very little support for building Corridor H in Virginia” and expressed fear the proposed development would negatively impact scenic and natural resources in the George Washington National Forest and a wildlife corridor that includes North Mountain and the Great Eastern Trail.

That opposition followed a December 2022 letter from the Strasburg Town Council in Virginia to the FHWA concluding there “appears to be no benefits to the citizens of Strasburg that would result from constructing a Corridor H highway to connect with I-81 and/or I-66 near Strasburg, Virginia.”

Construction of Corridor H in Virginia would harm the town’s tourism industry by causing “irreversible damage” to the Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park and the Fisher’s Hill Civil War battlefield, the council predicted.

In a November letter to the Division of Highways, the Town of Wardensville expressed “growing concern” over construction plans for finishing Corridor H from just west of the town to the Virginia border.

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The town predicted it would be impossible for tractor trailers to use an anticipated exit just outside Wardensville to make deliveries and reported “little confidence” in the Division of Highways’ ability “in the area of designing around a difficult situation.”

The town said the current terminus of Corridor H just west of Wardensville has been the site of dozens of accidents since its completion due to poor design, “a sudden, sharp S-curve at the bottom of a long mountain requiring a rapid decrease in speed,” says the Wardensville letter.

The Stewards of the Potomac Highlands said in its Nov. 13 letter to the Division of Highways that traffic volume doesn’t merit a four-lane highway from Wardensville to the Virginia border.

The group recommended a “no-build” alternative” for Corridor H, calling it a “proposed highway to nowhere” that would impair Wardensville’s Main Street district.

The Stewards of the Potomac Highlands noted “[s]erious water quality concerns,” fearing impacts to Wardensville’s water system.

Flatley acknowledged the Wardensville-to-Virginia alignment would cross the Wardensville source water protection area.

The Division of Highways has modified its roadway design to raise the profile grade as much as possible, “ensuring a vertical separation between our construction and the aquifer,” Flatley said.

All retention ponds and drainage ditches within the source water protection area will be lined with impervious material to ensure no runoff infiltration, Flatley pledged.

## **Disturbances proposed for steep slopes**

Corridor H drew support during last month's DEP permit modification public meeting from the mayor of Davis.

"We want a highway," Davis Mayor Alan Tomson said, predicting Corridor H development would expand tourist access and quicken access to emergency services.

But the project drew heavier opposition during the meeting from environmentalists.

West Virginia Rivers Coalition staff scientist Jenna Dodson said areas of steep slopes in the proposed permit modification area increase the likelihood that erosion control efforts would fail. Dodson feared sedimentation issues that could degrade streams within the Monongahela National Forest.

Susan Rosenblum, chair of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy's Rivers Committee, expressed concern that the watershed of Big Run Bog within the forest would be impacted, citing topographic and core drilling maps in the permitting application.

"[I]f this area is degraded, I don't believe that tourism will be as popular anymore," Rosenblum said.

Fletcher, the DEP spokesperson, said a majority of the proposed core borings are within the Monongahela National Forest.

Over a quarter of the proposed permit modification disturbance area has soil characteristics showing slopes of 35% or greater, according to the stormwater pollution prevention plan.

State officials offered assurance of limited potential environmental impact if Greenman-Pedersen's proposed permit modification is approved.

Travis Long, director of the Division of Highways' technical support unit, promised no negative impacts to the Big Run Bog watershed.

Long indicated although operations may take place within 100 feet of the area, they would only take place in the drainage area for the north side of the mountain, meaning no potential for drainage into the Big Run Bog.

Long said core drilling would yield a better understanding of geotechnical site aspects that could help avoid acid mine drainage issues that opponents of the proposal fear it would exacerbate.

The Division of Highways would have an environmental coordinator onsite throughout the proposed core drilling, Long said.

But some [doubt persists over the legality](#) of the permit, which never was publicly advertised before it was issued in May. The DEP has said it didn't require public notice because it didn't meet criteria requiring public notice in the state's stormwater construction permit.

Opponents of the state's planned Corridor H route, though, have pointed to federal environmental code applicable to Clean Water Act-enabled state water pollution control programs requiring draft permits to be publicly noticed and made available for comment.

"Denying the public the opportunity to remind you again of what is at stake and then issuing a permit is shameful," Canaan Valley native and landowner Linda Cooper said during the DEP's meeting.

## **Is the process working?**

The Governor's Office noted in a Jan. 11 press release announcing J.F. Allen as the successful bidder of the U.S. 219-W.Va. 72 interchange paving project that the area of Corridor H from Kerens in Randolph County to Parsons spans some of the route's "most rugged terrain."

Justice's office recalled contracts awarded to Kokosing Construction Company Inc. in 2015 and 2019 totaling \$377.4 million for grading, drainage and construction work on that stretch of the road.

A [Gazette-Mail review last month found](#) the DEP had issued Kokosing 25 notices of violation after inspections of its Corridor H work in Tucker and Randolph counties since May 2021. The DEP found chronic Kokosing failures to maintain sediment and erosion control structures, resulting in sediment deposits on the bottom of Cheat River and Smokey Hollow tributaries, an oily slick on a Cheat River tributary and diesel-contaminated soil.

The DEP issued Greenman-Pedersen violation notices in October and November for erosion and sediment control failures in its work on Parsons-to-Davis core borings.

Tomson said the notices of violation indicate that “the process is working.”

But generations and many millions of dollars spent since it was first contemplated, Corridor H still can’t shake doubt among many West Virginians that it’s not headed toward an acceptable end.

“Plainly,” the Potomac Stewards of the Highlands told the Division of Highways, “this expensive eyesore of a highway does not make sense today.”

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