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Volkswagen's announcement of a new Tennessee plant can't speed work on Corridor K 'any faster than it's going now,' TDOT says

First Automaker says it will begin assembling 150,000 mid-size sedans annually at a \$1 billion plant near Cleveland, Tenn., in 2011

If ever completed from Cleveland to Dillsboro, N.C., the Land of Sky Parkway, a.k.a. Corridor K, would move new VW's to world markets across North Carolina, eliminating need to travel I-75 South and Atlanta's plodding I-285 beltway

**By Tom Bennett
Special to Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition**

Murphy, N.C., July 15, 2008 – Volkswagen Group of America's announcement today that it will construct an auto plant near Cleveland and Chattanooga in east Tennessee, cheered by state leaders, has not sped the planning for Land of Sky Parkway, a spokesman insisted.

“The Volkswagen announcement couldn’t make it go any faster than it already is going,” said Wesley Hughen. He is project manager for the proposed Appalachian Development Highway System Corridor K, which has been talked about since John F. Kennedy was in the White House and dressed up by Tennessee this year with the new name Land of Sky Parkway.

It would somehow embellish existing U.S. 64 to grow to four lanes through the fragile Ocoee River gorge. Or they might veer above the gorge and be bridged and paved high up through the Little Frog Wilderness, which is the steep, pitched home of the only remaining pristine, wild stretch of the Hiwassee River.

“We were already in the process of moving on it,” Hughen told me. “The committee made the selection of the consultant in May. I haven’t gotten around to putting it on the (TDOT) web site. I’ll get that fixed right away.

“The consultant is URS Inc. of Mooresville, N.C.,” Hughen continued. “We’re having meetings with them to answer questions like, ‘How long will it take? How much will it cost? The next meeting is Aug. 1.”

The North Carolina Division of San Francisco-based URS Corp. has the tasks of preparing – get ready, readers, here comes the alphabet soup! – a Transportation Planning Report (TPR), Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and Context Sensitive Solution/Design (CSS/D) for Corridor K.

An earlier EIS entailing four lanes, four tunnels and 30 bridges through the Ocoee Gorge was shelved and has been taken off the Internet.

‘OUR TIME HAS ARRIVED,’ REP. WAMP EXULTS

Tennessee elected officials sparred today for reporters’ attention to praise Volkswagen Group of America and claim part of the credit for a plant they say will employ 2,000 persons.

“I’m enormously pleased by the announcement from Volkswagen Group of America and grateful for the company’s investment in Chattanooga and in the people of Tennessee,” said Gov. Phil Bredesen.

“I couldn’t be more pleased that the spirit of partnership between the state of Tennessee, Volkswagen and the government and business leadership of Chattanooga and Hamilton County has resulted in this investment in Enterprise South,” said Matt Kisber, commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development. Enterprise South is a 1,350-acre business park 12 miles northeast of Chattanooga.

“We started with a vision of transforming an idle Army facility into the source of thousands of family-wage jobs,” said Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey.

“Volkswagen and Chattanooga have a lot in common,” said City of Chattanooga Mayor Ron Littlefield. “Both are serious about environmental sustainability and 21st Century manufacturing.”

“Volkswagen and Chattanooga are the ideal marriage, one of the world’s most admired companies and one of America’s most livable cities,” said U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander.

The Bredesen, Kisber, Ramsey, Littlefield and Alexander quotes are in Jill Bratina’s article for P.R. Newswire on the web site of the Tennessee Dept. of Economic and Community Development.

“It was just a matter of time before a major auto manufacturer decided to locate at Enterprise South, and our time has arrived,” said U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp of Chattanooga on his web site. “This new partnership with Volkswagen showcases Chattanooga’s position as a manufacturing giant in the Tennessee Valley Technology Corridor.”

SO FAR, THIRD TRY AT LURING AN AUTOMAKER IS A SUCCESS

The German automaker chose Tennessee's over sites in Alabama and Michigan, the Associated Press reported in the New York Times.

Volkswagen approved up to \$991.4 million to build the plant, AP reported. Are you beginning to see what is at stake here?

Chattanooga was spurned earlier by Toyota, which chose a site near Tupelo, Miss., and also by Kia, which chose a location in West Point, Ga.

Christian Wolff is the governor of the German state of Lower Saxony. It owns 20 percent of Volkswagen. "The new plant, in addition to factories in India and Russia, is part of the Volkswagen strategy to expand," Wolff told AP.

'INCENTIVES TIED TO JOB CREATION AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT'

After auto plants are turning out new vehicles, then and only then do reporters begin to use open-records statutes and uncover the gratuitous tax breaks given the automakers. These tax breaks create revenue shortfalls for states that typically have statutes requiring annual balanced budgets. So the millions of dollars in shortfall is made up by the ordinary citizens from places in the American South like Soddy Daisy, and not Lower Saxony.

I e-mailed Jill Bratina on the Dept. of Economic and Community Development and asked, "What incentives did Volkswagen of America receive from Tennessee Dept. of Economic and Community Development to build an automotive production facility at Enterprise South Industrial Park?" She has not responded, but as soon as I have her reply I'll ask for it to be added here.

"Volkswagen of America received an attractive, comprehensive package of incentives," states her press release. "The statutory incentives are tied to job creation and capital investment. Additional support includes assistance for public infrastructure and job training."

THE STATE OF ALABAMA was runner-up to Tennessee in the Volkswagen sweepstakes. According to News Channel 9 ABC of Chattanooga, quoting the Mobile Press-Register newspaper, the following is a quote demonstrating how high are the stakes in these auto-plant competitions in the Southern states. The quote is about the race for Volkswagen, and it is from Gov. Bob Riley of Alabama:

"Alabama offered a package that included \$205 million in cash, plus another \$181 million in tax breaks, job training and other considerations. It was the most the state ever offered for an auto plant."

Permanent harm to storied rivers named the Ocoee, Hiwassee and Nantahala could be the result of an improved highway that aids exports and thereby buttresses jobs for 2,000 persons. Those 2,000 constitute .000006565 percent of the U.S. population, according to today's estimate by the Census Bureau. This is a swap of natural beauty in the Blue Ridge for jobs plus political coups for a few elected officials. Is that an acceptable tradeoff?

THE ENGINEERING GIANT NOW WEIGHING OUR ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURE

The winner of this latest Tennessee effort to write an actionable Corridor K impact study is the URS Corp. headquartered on Montgomery Street in San Francisco. This giant is the 34th largest federal prime contractor. It had 2006 revenues of \$5.2 billion, according to washingtontechnology.com.

Its 56,000 employees work in "a network of offices in major cities in the Americas, Asia-Pacific, the Middle East and Europe. In the heart of at least an economic slowdown and maybe a recession, URS Corp. thrives. It was up \$1.74 on the New York Stock Exchange today to \$42.04 per share.

According to the "key recent developments" click on the Reuters news site, URS Corp. has received a \$153 million contract to build buildings at Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala.; a \$46.5 million contract to design what is called the 465-69 Northeast Corridor for the Indiana Department of Transportation; a \$90

million contract to manage geotechnical evaluations for levees for the California Department of Water Resources; and a \$100 million contract to perform remedial actions at Navy and Marine Corps installations in seven states.

THE ‘MISSING LINK’

An existing 1978-79 stretch of Corridor K four-lane is in place from the Tennessee state line through the town of Murphy, near my home, and its concrete path reaches to a point just east of the town of Andrews. There the pavement narrows to two lanes. Environmental concerns about the nearby Nantahala Gorge brought work to a halt there in 1979. Symbolically, there is today an open-pit, fill-dirt quarry by Corridor K there at its current Eastern terminus. When it rains, red dirt from this pit washes out onto the road. It’s as if the would-be road contractor still is getting even for having been stopped cold there at that point east of Andrews.

WERE NCDOT EVER to complete right-of-way acquisition and undertake to finish the “missing link,” the giant agency will surely face as great or greater an array of roadblocks than those still confronting Tennesseans who now are toasting each other at parties.

Let’s say all sides could agree, and “missing-link” construction went forward, maybe in your grandchildren’s lifetimes. Big transport carriers loaded with Volkswagen sedans and emitting carbon monoxide into these mountain heights would travel the “missing link” to Dillsboro. There they would roll onto the Smoky Mountain Expressway. It is convenient, it is fast, and it is a blight upon the Blue Ridge if ever there was one.

That path of pavement and smog would take the loads of sedans to Asheville where they would lumber onto I-40, North Carolina’s freeway main street. The transports’ drivers would smile a bit knowing they had escaped the snail’s pace of Atlanta’s I-285 and the winding, treacherous right-lane-only of I-40 west through the Great Smoky Mountains. Ahead of them via a variety of other Southern freeways would lay waiting at seaports from Virginia to Savannah the cargo ships assigned to take the Volkswagens to foreign countries.

TO CUT and grade all those slopes, fell thousands of trees, silt up creeks and rivers, and pave hundreds of miles of asphalt or concrete over mountains and thereby for 24 hours a day have trucks emitting carbon monoxide into the Blue Ridge... Is the tradeoff of environmental quality for these jobs and politics worth it?

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