

## **We Don't Want A Loop Road!**

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Photo: DNR file

At hearings on the matter, the public has repeatedly rejected the MPO/VDOT plans for a bypass around Harrisonburg. A bypass is not needed to serve the rural areas of the county, and won't make it easier for residents to get to work.

Enough is enough. After 12 long years of sustained public opposition to a Harrisonburg loop road or bypass through Rockingham County's prime farmlands and historic battlefields, it is time to eliminate this highway threat for good.

Let's start with the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Metropolitan Planning Organization. On Thursday, from 4:30-6:30 p.m. at the Rockingham County Government Center in the Community Development Department Meeting Room, the agency will hold a public input meeting on its five-year and long-range transportation plans. Officials from Harrisonburg, Rockingham County, Bridgewater, Dayton, Mount Crawford, and Virginia's Department of Transportation make up the MPO. Written or emailed comments need to be in before Feb. 2.

These plans contain a wish list of highway projects, including multiple sections of a loop road around the city that have long been discussed as an Interstate 81 bypass. In VDOT's plan for I-81, Harrisonburg is one of only two places in the entire corridor that calls for the expansion of the interstate to be built on a new location.

One section of this bypass would plow through Rockingham County's Agricultural Reserve area to the edge of the Cross Keys and Port Republic battlefields. Another section could bring new pavement and new traffic to the scenic farmland west of Eastern Mennonite University. This doesn't help local residents get to jobs and shopping, it encourages sprawling development and additional traffic congestion.

It's time to tell the MPO that any segments of a Harrisonburg bypass need to be removed from any and all road plans for good. The community has rejected such a bypass multiple times — in 2000, 2004, 2005 and 2006 — with hundreds of residents turning out at hearings in opposition. We should not have to repeat our objections every five years:

1. A Harrisonburg bypass is not needed to serve the rural areas that make Rockingham Virginia's top agricultural producer. In fact, a bypass through the county's prime farmland would increase rural development pressure in direct conflict with the county's comprehensive plan.
2. A Harrisonburg bypass won't make it any easier for local people to get to work. Bypasses enable through-travelers to avoid an area. They generally don't help with local traffic congestion.
3. A Harrisonburg bypass on long-range plans hurts our region's ability to plan for and fund the sensible road projects we really need. The Stone Spring (Southeast) Connector now under way and similar needed projects should not be hampered by an unnecessary bypass.

Unfortunately other worrisome projects are in the MPO plan. Maps show roads in the Dayton area slicing through agricultural/forestal districts. Major new highways inevitably bring pressure for new housing subdivisions, commercial development and eventually the need for expensive public services. This, in some of the most rural and productive farmland in the county.

Why do these bad road projects refuse to die despite ongoing public protests? Circular bureaucratic thinking seems to be the main problem. The MPO tells us not to worry, it's just a "Vision Plan" and includes all possible future road projects. The county wants their road plans to be consistent with the MPO's, so they're reluctant to remove the roads, and the city says it can't act while the bypass remains on the county plan.

So let's finally eliminate these bad road projects, starting with the MPO. Go to the hearing on Thursday and insist "Enough is Enough" And make your written or emailed comment before Feb. 2. Tell planners to eliminate any and all segments of a Harrisonburg bypass (segments 22A, 22B, 26, 81A and 81B) and destructive projects in the Dayton area (segments 21, 39, and 77B).

The MPO Vision Plan map and project descriptions can be viewed at [the website](#) of Community Alliance for Preservation under the "What's New" section.

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