

## TDOT Chief Engineer Addresses Hwy 10 Hill

Written by Debbie Gregory  
Wednesday, May 29, 2013

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For years we have been waiting for the Highway 10 Hill to be reconstructed, only to be frustrated at every turn. Governor Haslam and Transportation Commissioner Schroer's 3-year transportation plan was released in April of this year and the Highway 10 Hill construction project, involving a 1.7 mile stretch of highway, wasn't listed.

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When County Mayor Shelvy Linville contacted Commissioner Schroer concerning funding for State Route 10 from south of Goose Creek to State Route 52 at the top of the hill, he informed him that funding had been shifted to a new program devoted to preserving and improving the National Highway System, therefore funding provided to Tennessee was significantly reduced. Schroer stated that it was a department priority to allocate funds throughout the state to assure an equal distribution to all Tennesseans. He did convey that SR-10 was a committed project and that as future budgets were prepared, funding for this project would be given every consideration.

Two weeks later an article appeared on the front page of the *Chronicle*, interviewing Mayor Linville, who was concerned about this set back. Shortly after, a public meeting was set for last Thursday with Tennessee Department of Transportation's Deputy Commissioner and Chief Engineer Paul Degges to discuss Highway 10 in Macon County.

A large crowd of determined Macon Countians turned out to listen to the chief engineer discuss

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how TDOT develops projects, the three phases of a project and the specifics of State Route 10.

“The first thing I want to say is the Highway 10 Hill project has not been cancelled, shelved or anything like that,” said Chief Engineer Degges. “The activity is underway on it right now. I want to give you a little background first on how we do business and how we develop a project.”

Degges said, “For us to develop projects there are a lot of rules you have to go through. About half the money that comes to the department is federal aid. A lot of routine stuff is funded with state dollars, but what I call our heavy construction budget, projects like State Route 10, are built with federal aid money. They are typically 80 percent federal aid with a 20 percent state match.”

Degges says that with most projects across the state the communities have been talking about the need for years.

The engineering stage is the first phase. It is generally about 10 percent of the cost of the project and when it is finished TDOT has a set of plans to go by in buying real estate. “What is bad for the government, is every time a new administrator comes in, if you throw all the old stuff out and start new, you’d never deliver anything. You would always be starting over. So, state law and federal law have checks and balances that keep us from starts and stops. Under state law, once we commit to that engineering phase, we have to see the project through to completion. Commissioners and governors don’t have the authority to cancel a project.”

The second phase is the right of way acquisition, which is about 15 percent of the project. The right of way is a set of plans to buy the real estate to build the project.

The third phase is the construction which is about 75 percent of the project and that’s the road to drive on.

“When we say we are going to do a project the national average from when you start till you are driving on it is 13 to 15 years,” Chief Deggs said. “We are a little bit better than that in Tennessee, we average from 10 to 12 years, depending on the project.”

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The Highway 10 project was started in the 2004-2005 budget year. "I know it seems long, but we are not through that time frame," Degges noted. "If you go much faster, then you run over the rights of people in the community. If you go too fast and make hasty decisions, you upset people. But, I would certainly like it to be better than 10 to 12 years. My goal is to cut that in half."

TDOT has a 16 billion dollar investment in the state transportation network in Tennessee and one of the big things they look at is maintaining bridges and pavement. "Before we can build new wider roads we need to maintain our investment on our existing roads," continued Degges.

TDOT is one of only five state DOT's that does not borrow money to fund projects, and the program continues TDOT's "pay as you go" philosophy, carrying no debt for any transportation initiatives.

"The number one thing that I try to do when putting our program together is balance," he said. "We're trying to make sure we spread the money around. The problem is, there is a whole lot more need out there, than there is dollars."

The chief engineer's role is to try and find the most sufficient way to put dollars out where everybody in Tennessee gets transportation services. "So that's kind of what we have going."

Degges said every year when the General Assembly passes the budget, the department is required to submit a list of projects in support of the budget. "In 2005 or so, we felt that it was better since the General Assembly and state government just passed the annual budget. Historically, we just did a one year list. We thought it would be a good idea to help communities, businesses and contractors and all from a planning standpoint to do a second and third year. So when you hear the three-year program the second and third year are not funded, they are tentative. The only year that counts is the first."

The chief engineer says things do change. That's the mechanics of how things work.

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After the 3-year plan was put out in April of 2012, Congress passed the new transportation bill. It gave the transportation department flexibility in some ways but took away some. It shifted a lot of money and the program for the two lane state routes was cut almost in half. "Now all of a sudden I've got this huge back load of projects across the state, and I've got less than 50 million dollars to address these type projects. Remember I was already in the fiscal year and we had already made some commitments so we are trying to figure out what to do and then we will put together next year's program."

That kind of sets the stage for Macon County. While TDOT is a big agency, they have to live within their means. "When we put our program together State Route 10 had to be rescheduled because the dollars weren't available to us," said Degges. "We identified this project in a previous program and we have 28 pieces of real estate to buy and we have identified 16 residential relocations."

The 16 properties are homes and those people have to be relocated. They are in that process right now, according to Degges.

Mr. Degges says that in rural areas it is a whole lot harder to relocate people because of the availability of housing. "From a schedule stand point, it looks like we will have all that finished to where we will be able to go to contract probably in the spring to summer of 2014. We will have new money in October of 2014. From a construction stand point a project like this will probably take 24 to 30 months."

Nation wide there is about 42 billion dollars a year that goes into the federal transportation bill because the amount of money we pay in gas taxes doesn't cover the amount of money we are spending. There is 12 billion dollars out of the US General Fund going into transportation. "For us to maintain the current level of spending, starting October 1, 2014, they would need about 18 billion dollars out of the US General Fund to maintain the current level of spending," added Degges. "If the money doesn't show up not just this project but basically every new capacity project is jeopardized. I can't promise this project will go to contract next fall if the money's not there. I suspect if the money isn't there, it won't be anywhere."

Chief Engineer Degges provided a platform for questions and open talk after he attempted to reinforce TDOT's dedication to the Highway 10 Hill. A number of citizens in attendance at the meeting expressed their concerns about the project dragging on. When I ask County Mayor Linville for a comment later on he said "I am very disappointed that construction will not begin in

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February of 2014, as originally scheduled and I must say that I am equally disappointed in Senator Beavers response, or lack thereof, to this news when it was released by the Governor on April 16. However, based on comments by Paul Degges, I remain cautiously optimistic that funding will be in the 2014-2015 budget for construction.”