

In the past, I obsessed over roads and paving, probably because, as a boy, I rode around South Georgia with my father looking at roads under construction. My father was a state highway engineer, and I was fascinated with highway construction. I cherish those memories of my father driving his old Plymouth station wagon, going about 3 miles an hour on a freshly paved road, checking for correct grades and the dreaded inclusions.

Highways are pathways for mobility, economic prosperity, and the public to live the good life. With the loss of key roads in the wake of Hurricane Helene, that observation has never been more obvious. A major component of recovery will be rebuilding washed-out roads and bridges. Let me update you on a number of road issues on the Highlands Plateau.

First, that primary artery to Highlands, NC 106, will be out for several months. Some folks think I need to be more proactive in having NCDOT speed up the time frame. Our legislative delegation has communicated to NCDOT the critical need for repairing NC106 as soon as possible. I have, too. Now, everyone needs to take a deep breath and let NCDOT do their work in the most effective way possible. They are facing a multitude of projects that also have high priority to the recovery of Western North Carolina.

Second, a pressure point has now become US 64, the Gorge Road between Franklin and Highlands. The challenge is to keep tractor-trailers off this road and have them use the NC 107 detour that begins at Dillsboro over to Cashiers.

There has been mixed success in stopping tractor-trailer trucks on the Gorge Road. Some days, it is totally clear, and others, multiple tractor-trailer trucks attempt the impossible trip and shut down the road.

I drove the Gorge Road this week from Franklin to Highlands. There are three points where truckers can stop and turn around. First, there is the initial truck turnaround just at the Franklin town limits with signs telling tractor-trailer trucks to make the turn and not go up the Gorge Road. Second, NCDOT has put an electronic sign in the area where there is a gas station and the Assembly of God Church. The sign tells them to turn around where there is a very big church parking lot. Finally, at Walnut Creek Road, there is a sign telling truckers to turn around. Again, there is a church parking lot at Walnut Creek and US 64 intersection where a turnaround could be made.

There are additional signs on the route and nearby roads warning truckers not to use the Gorge Road. So when an irresponsible trucker gets stuck at the Gorge, there are no excuses to be made now, only if the Dollar General trucks and their dispatchers would heed the warnings, not only on the Gorge Road but also on Warwoman.

On the Highlands side, our police department has increased its presence near the NC 106 and US 64 intersection. They will stop truckers who attempt to go down the Gorge Road,

but they can not be there 24/7. They must respond to other calls and make security patrols throughout the town.

I was talking with one officer this week who stated that if they see a tractor-trailer truck in town, they will follow it to ensure it does not attempt to go down the Gorge Road. The officer said she followed one trucker who took the NC 106 detour to Spring Street to make a delivery at Reeves Hardware. After making the delivery, the trucker still attempted to go down the Gorge Road.

When possible, the police are also stopping those driving huge RVs with many times cars in tow. Some of these RVs are the size of a Greyhound bus and can not make the turns on the Gorge Road without, at the very least, damaging the sides of the RV. By federal law, these big RVs can travel anywhere in the country, thanks to AARP lobbyists. Our police stop them to warn them of the problem and to avoid the road's closure like what happens with a tractor trailer truck. Officers tell me a stuck RV can be even more problematic than a tractor-trailer. I can just see a senior citizen like myself trying to back up an RV with a car in tow. Sometimes, I very much appreciate driving a Mini Cooper. It's getting to be about all I want to handle.

Finally, our town road paving projects should wrap up in two weeks. Arnold Road remains to be paved as does Gibson Street. They will be the last two paving projects for the year.