I previously wrote about the update the Division 14 engineer gave on WNC road conditions post-Helene. The update and others were given at a recent Southwestern Regional Planning Organization meeting of their Transportation Advisory Committee.

Daniel Finley of the NC State Institute of Transportation Research and Education provided another update on transportation and future needs. His presentation covered an array of topics, from bridge conditions, how to fund transportation, tourist transportation issues, and electric vehicle transportation. Let me highlight some of the information he presented.

First, Finely presented a recent study conducted by the NC State Transportation Institute that surveyed the condition of critical NC bridges critical to commerce and agriculture. The study highlighted a number of bridges in WNC that are substandard and need to be replaced. The good news for us is that the Middle Creek Bridge on NC 106 was not on the list. The 1940 bridge is in the final stages of being replaced with a new, larger bridge. It is slated to open soon. Given the washout problem on NC 106, the bridge replacement is very fortunate and timely.

Another area bridge on the replacement list is the C. Tom Bryson Bridge, which crosses the Cullasaja River on the Gorge Road. That replacement will be a major construction project that is scheduled to begin around 2026 or maybe longer down the road. Who can predict the post-Helene recovery cycle?

Finely also covered the emerging use of electric vehicles. Notice I didn't say cars. He emphasized that electric ground vehicles, especially self-driving electric cars, have hit technological obstacles that have slowed their proliferation. He predicted self-driving vehicles, even with the explosion of AI, might be a long way out from realization. The self-driving cars simply can’t be programmed as of yet to decipher unexpected situations like trees that have fallen on roadways. My take is that with the incoming Trump administration, the proliferation of EVs may be in question, especially if tax credits are eliminated, and the "drill baby drill” mantra becomes a reality.

What Finely did stress is that electric aviation vehicles, including drones, are emerging toward very practical applications. Options like self-flying air taxis may not be that far into the future. A vehicle in the air doesn’t have the multitude of obstacles to negotiate as do electric vehicles.

Finely stated, his organization is studying airport accessibility for electric aircraft. Electric charging stations at airports will be essential. He noted that these charging stations are nonexistent in the WNC and North Georgia region, while other regions are already installing them.

Drone deliveries of supplies, prescriptions, and restaurant dinners, especially pizzas, are right before us. Finely concluded by stating the folks in Holly Springs, right here in WNC, can already get drone deliveries of restaurant dinners and pizzas.

Finely also touched on the massive task of funding transportation needs, especially new road construction. The gas tax has been traditionally a primary source of funding for NCDOT. With the current expansive construction needs, the static gas tax is falling way short of meeting funding requirements. An aggravating factor is the current and maybe growing use of electric vehicles that do not contribute to gasoline revenues.

Very soon, the NC legislature will have to tackle this problem of how to fund transportation needs in this growing state. I think I have one answer, one of several possibilities. I will share it with you in my next article.