

Way back in the good old days, there were no roads to Highlands, just what we now would consider mountain trails. The Gorge Road between Highlands and Franklin was built in 1929, the Walhala Road, aka NC 28, in 1938, and the Dillard Road, aka NC 106, in 1940. What I mean by a built road to Highlands is that drivers and passengers would not have to get out and push their cars through ruts and mud on what was built originally for wagons. These new modern roads provided the prospect of continuous traffic flow without delays.

Well, now, in 2024, continuous traffic flow without delays is no longer the case with NC 106; as of last Saturday morning, it has been closed completely due to major damage incurred during Hurricane Helene. I always worried about the Gorge Road, US 64, being shut down. In fact, it was shut down this past February due to a major washout but was repaired and reopened in only several weeks. I didn't have the same concern for NC 106, the main corridor to Georgia.

Unlike the short closure time for the Gorge Road, we will not be so fortunate with the closure of NC 106 between Scaly and Highlands. The rebuilding of that section will take months. NCDOT understandably does not want to over-promise an early completion date. Their current estimate is four months to rebuild and open NC 106.

I'm more optimistic that they can do like what was done on the Gorge Road repair and open NC 106 ahead of that projected date, say late December or early January. But that may just be my wishful thinking.

NCDOT is facing tremendous pressure across Western North Carolina in the aftermath of Helene, and their resources and personnel are stretched very thin. It will take years to rebuild the hundreds of roads, bridges, and culverts that have been damaged or completely destroyed.

For the NC 106 project to move forward ahead of schedule, a lot of variables would have to fall into place for NCDOT staff. First, they would need a spate of good weather, allowing for continuous working days. Second, they would need access to critical materials without incurring back-order delays. With the demand for construction materials throughout WNC that may be a challenge. I already know they will have to replace the old 1940 stone piping system, which failed, the primary source of the road failure, with huge concrete cast pipes that could be over 6 feet in diameter. Installing these massive pipe sections in highly distressed mountain terrain will be an engineering and construction challenge. That installation will only be the first step in stabilizing and rebuilding the roadbed. A third concern is that once construction begins, there is always the possibility of discovering more structural problems that must be corrected. I understand the engineers have already discovered additional road stability problems near the original washout area.

So, I guess what I am saying is that we all have to be patient with what NCDOT has to do. It is not an easy and fast fix like the Gorge Road repair. What amazes me is that the system installed on NC 106 over 85 years ago has held up as long as it has.

In the meantime, the detour for traffic will be to use US 441 to Franklin. Cars and small trucks will then be able to take the Gorge Road to Highlands. A tractor-trailer truck must continue to Dillsboro and proceed to Cashiers by way of NC 107. Expect a lot of truck traffic on US 64 from Cashiers into Highlands.

The concern is that some tractor-trailer operators will attempt to bypass this long detour and come to Highlands on the Gorge Road. Also, some tractor-trailer trucks that normally follow the route from Highlands to Dillard might attempt to go down the Gorge Road to Franklin as a shortcut.

Law enforcement agencies and NCDOT will have to maintain enforcement efforts to keep these huge trucks off the Gorge Road. It has to be open to our visitors, workers, building contractors, and delivery folks who operate vehicles of the permitted size and can negotiate those sharp curves near the Cullasaja Gorge. Efforts to address this potential problem are underway.

I hope cool heads and understanding will prevail during the challenging coming weeks and months. Working together, we will get through this period.

Several years ago, NCDOT planned to upgrade and improve NC 106. Citizens reacted negatively to the plan, and it was removed from the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) prioritization list. Two years ago, it was put back on the Macon County Comprehensive Transportation Plan as a project that might be funded around 2040. It is time to rethink the prioritization of NC106, which is a lifeline for the Highlands and Cashiers area.