I recently chaired the Southwestern Regional Planning Commission’s Transportation Advisory Committee meeting. Let me review some of the transportation issues the committee discussed.

First, NCDOT engineers stated they were working nonstop to repair and reopen I-40 next to the Pigeon River near the Tennessee state line. It was stressed that there will be short-term repairs to reopen the road, and also a long-term plan to secure the road against washouts from the flooding river. Governor Stein has set March 1 as a partial opening of one lane in each direction.

Also, we discussed how Helene's recovery challenges have delayed a number of road projects that were on the state prioritization schedule. It will take quite some time to reprioritize this list of projects and get back on schedule, even before Helene NCDOT fell behind due to funding shortfalls.

Let me highlight the status of several area projects that may impact the Highlands and Cashiers area. First on the list is the intersection improvement at NC 107 and US 64, aka the Cashiers crossroads. For now, right-of-way acquisition is to begin on 7/21/2027, and the project will be let on 1/22/2030. All of these dates are subject to change.

Another project is the C. Tom Bryson bridge replacement on the Gorge Road between Franklin and Highlands. Its tentative start date is 4/20/2027.   This bridge replacement will be a major project impacting traffic between the two towns, as well as impacting tourist traffic.

The proposed improvement of the parking area and a pedestrian bridge at Dry Falls is another project on the list. This project was designed and conceived by the US Forest Service over 20 years ago. NCDOT must partner and administer the project because it impacts a state road. I am hopeful and optimistic that federal funds can be appropriated for this project and construction can get underway by late 2026. The explosion of growth in the area may generate a reprioritization of this project.

Also, on the list of projects in the area is the Middle Creek Bridge replacement on NC 106 just below Scaly Mountain. That project is nearing completion with part of the new bridge already open to traffic. Several improvements will eventually be made to the road approaching the bridge. Since the old bridge was built around 1940, this new bridge project was long overdue and much needed.

At the TAC meeting, it was pointed out that NCDOT gets numerous requests to take over privately built roads, as does the town of Highlands. The concept with a takeover is that once executed, the state, or a municipality, would be committed to maintaining and repaving the road from there on out. A light bulb went off in my head that this state takeover program might apply to some private roads that Highlands has declined to takeover because the roads did not meet town subdivision road standards. That light bulb was quickly turned off when it was disclosed very few requests are granted by the state because the private roads have to meet state standards, especially state right-of-way requirements. Some homeowners on these private, substandard roads complain that they would have no front yards left if they met the state right-of-way requirements. In short, state road takeover requirements are even more stringent than the town's. The crux of the matter is developers, back in the good old days, built inadequate subdivision roads that homeowners have to deal with now. Those 10-foot roads should have been 16 or 18 feet wide.