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| I chaired the quarterly Transportation Advisory Committee of the Southwestern Regional Planning Organization last week at Southwestern Community College. We had several presenters, one of which was Wanda Payne, the NCDOT Division 14 Engineer. Payne gave us a regional update on the aftermath of Helene on the road system in Western North Carolina. She emphasized that NCDOT had been dealing with over 800 road and bridge outages in the region. While Division 14, of which Highlands did suffer some major outages, Division 13, which is to the east, took the major impact of road damage.We were shown aerial photographs of road washouts and damaged bridges. NCDOT has a schedule to address these major problems. Payne said that 80% of the road outages should be repaired within the 6 months after Helene. Included are the repairs to NC 106 between Highlands and Scaly. The schedule calls for 90% restoration of damaged roads and bridges within the first year of Helena's impact. After 2 years, 100% restoration will be the goal. One might ponder why making all the repairs will take so long. The answer is that some major highway bridges in the hurricane's direct path were washed away or sustained major damage. A case in point is I 40 near the Tennessee border. The Pigeon River hit I-40 with an explosion of water, as the photos our committee saw. To do a full and permanent repair to that section of I-40 will take a long time. The one-lane opening on both ways to I-40 scheduled to go into operation around New Year will only be a temporary fix.I asked our division engineer if the rumor of the fix to I-40 costing around 1 billion dollars was accurate. Her reply was the billion-dollar estimate for a permanent solution for that stretch of the interstate is in that ballpark.Our Transportation Advisory Committee is tasked with prioritizing road construction projects in the seven-county tip of Western North Carolina. We follow a prioritization formula developed by NCDOT and approved by the state legislature over a decade ago. Prior to Helene, our priorities were more than 39 million dollars over what NCDOT had allocated, so we were about to start the process of paring down the needs to meet the financial realities. Payne broke the bad news that with all the pressing needs coming from Helene, the financial situation would become even more dire. The committee came to this meeting knowing needs would have to be adjusted and project schedules delayed.At the end of the meeting, I thanked Payne,  Division 14, and her staff for their response to the critical situation on NC 106. She assured me they are doing everything possible to get the road open as soon as possible.   NCDOT is in the same situation as building inspectors are in the region. Both are under pressure to cut corners to get roads open and people back in housing. On the other hand, if best practices are not followed, injury and loss of life could result. Public patience is needed and certainly appreciated. |

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