I chaired the Southwestern Regional Planning Organization's Transportation Advisory Committee meeting last week. This committee’s main task is to provide prioritization of road projects to North Carolina DOT planners.

There are a number of projects in Macon County that will begin in the coming year if the current schedule remains unchanged. The bridge at Gold Mine Road over the Cullasaja and feeds into US 64 is scheduled to be replaced. Also, the Peeks Creek Bridge is on the replacement schedule. The replacement bridge over Middle Creek on NC 106, just past Scaly, has been partially completed with two lanes open and is scheduled for completion by this fall. The finished bridge will be much wider than the original bridge that was built around 1940.

NCDOT is also now requesting public input about replacing the J. Tom Bryson Bridge over the Cullasaja River on US 64. Comments can be made by going to US64-CullasajaRiver-Bridge@publicinput.com. That project is being planned and scheduled in the near term. The deadline for public comment is April 24, 2025.

The improvement of the Cashiers intersection at US 64 and NC 107 made the TAC board’s priority list last year. In fact, we did a points trading maneuver to move this project higher on the list. However, NCDOT recently came back with the final prioritization and had again moved it back down the list. I estimate that the much-needed project may now be delayed until around 2030 or longer.

I will say that all this prioritization process has been impacted by rising costs and the challenge of restoring roads and bridges lost in Hurricane Helene. Our TAC committee heard an interesting update concerning the repairs and restoration of I-40 from the double tunnels at the Tennessee state line to five miles into Haywood County. The flooded Pigeon River next to the interstate blew away major road sections during Hurricane Helene.

Brian Burch, a former state highway engineer and now a consultant for the engineering firm hired to oversee the 1-40 repairs, will coordinate engineering and contract work. It is a major billion-dollar project on a fast track. Hopefully, all the work will be completed in 3 years. Meanwhile, traffic will be restricted to two lanes.

Just to illustrate the enormity of the task, Brian told us that over 300,000 dump truckloads of rock and soil supporting the road were lost in the storm. Plans call for constructing two rock quarries near the site to replace the lost material. Transporting such loads from distant sites to the work area is unfeasible.

Engineers are looking for several structural systems to support the road at various locations in the 5-mile repair area; different systems are needed for many road segments. The engineers are using innovative materials and systems to rebuild the roadway. Even their operational processes must be different to meet that 3-year opening goal. Traditionally, the road is first designed, put out for bids, and then construction gets underway. For this part of I-40, engineers are designing parts of the overall system separately, getting out bids, and having construction begin while they continue to design and plan for the final stages of the project. They know they must avoid unnecessary delays. Such a design and build process has successfully built public and private buildings, and DOT is now applying those techniques to this high-priority road project.

Finally, I want to thank Macon County, NCDOT, and the Army Corps of Engineers for clearing debris from Helene on our corridors and state roads. Last week, they had several crews working at various locations. Our corridors now look much better as tourists return to our community. The Highlands Chamber of Commerce has scheduled the Highlands Plateau Cleanup for Saturday, April 26. Call the chamber at 526-2112 to volunteer.