

Subject: Gorge Road Update  
February 5, 2024

The Gorge Road is a vital link for the two cities in Macon County., Franklin and Highlands. The photos show just how vulnerable the section of the road at the falls really is. Hopefully, the repairs in the first photo will be completed in the next few days. Luckily, the sections in the other photos did not fail. If those walls had collapsed, repair and restoration work would be much more complicated and longer in the making.

Lamar Nix, our town engineer, and I made a specially authorized site visit where the photos were taken. The problem facing NCDOT is that there are no improvement options for the Gorge Road, a historic highway built in 1929. Invasive construction to improve the road might just have the opposite effect by destabilizing what is already there.

The community and state have to protect the Gorge Road. Its economic value, not to mention its tourist attraction as an NC Scenic Byway, has to be preserved.

One way of protecting the Gorge Road is for the legislature to pass strict limits and fines on large tractor-trailer units that ignore the prohibition of such heavy vehicles on this fragile road. Almost a century ago, the original designers and engineers never imagined the gorge road as a byway for large fifty-foot tractor-trailers loaded with tons of goods. Even today, the last thing needed in those critical sections is to have a heavy, impactful load stressing the roadbed. It has to stop.

Some folks asked me to have the trees cut back at the Gorge Falls so tourists could see the falls. That decision lies with the US Forest Service. The superintendent recently informed me the Forest Service would not cut the trees. He stressed that the falls at that critical point on the highway are not a tourist venue, and large numbers of people stopping there should not be encouraged. I agree that there are already safety issues for tourists traveling on the Gorge Road. We do not need to create more. Again, to preserve this road, access needs to be controlled and limited.

On the other hand, the US Forest Service is concerned about massive tourist' attendance at Dry Falls and the dangerous vehicle backup during spring, summer, and fall at the entrance. Superintendent Waskey told me the Forest Service has revived the plan to create a parking area just off Paul Walden Way and build a skywalk over US 64 down to the falls. That plan would improve traffic backup on US 64 and be a great tourist venue. I enthusiastically support that plan. Hopefully, the federal government will fund the project as soon as possible. I will contact federal officials about supporting the project.

Finally, the Town Board of Commissioners workshop on Thursday, February 15, will be a business roundtable session. The agenda will be to discuss how the town

can support local businesses. The roundtable will begin at 6 pm at the Highlands Recreation Center across from First Citizens Bank.

I encourage businesspeople, chamber of commerce leaders, and interested citizens to come and participate in the discussion. Since December, I have solicited feedback concerning business issues. My request is still open, so contact me at [Mayor@highlandsnc.org](mailto:Mayor@highlandsnc.org). The feedback I have already received centers around the board topics of workforce housing, worker childcare, downtown parking, and business signage.

Hope to see everyone at the workshop. Bring your ideas and concerns for the board members to hear and consider. The regular business meeting of the town board will follow at 7 pm.

For more photos and information concerning the Gorge Road, go to [AskmayorPat.com](http://AskmayorPat.com).