

FORMER SECRETARY SAYS:

State Should Build On Transportation Gains Of Past 8 Years

(The author served as Secretary of Transportation in the Martin administration. This article is reprinted with permission of The John Locke Foundation, which originally published it in the February-March 1993 issue of Carolina Journal. Mr. Harrelson is a Southport resident for whom sections of U.S. 17 Bypass in Brunswick County were recently named. Editor's note.)

BY THOMAS J. HARRELSON
 During the past eight years, transportation has had a real friend in the Governor's Mansion. Major advances have been made in state and federal funding for North Carolina's highway system, and important initiatives have been made in aviation, rail, public transportation, ferries and bicycling.

In addition, vehicle registration has been streamlined and lines at

driver's license offices have been shortened. Driver and worker safety has been given a high priority, and the environment has been safeguarded and even enhanced.

Funding Issues

In the all-important funding area, Gov. Jim Martin and former Transportation Secretary Jim Harrington had excellent cooperation from the General Assembly in the adoption of the 1989 Highway Trust Fund, and in 1992 we had equally good teamwork from our congressional delegation in starting to climb out of last place in highway funding.

With these drastic improvements,

North Carolina has embarked on the planning, design and construction of a truly first-class transportation system that includes all modes of transportation and will serve the needs of all our citizens across the state.

Transportation funding deficiencies have been a challenge to North Carolina in recent history. For decades, our citizens were grossly shortchanged in federal transportation dollars, despite rapidly escalating federal taxes. Because of outdated and unfair congressional funding formulas, our state has been dead last over the past 30 years in the percentage return of federal highway and transit tax dollars.

In real terms, this has meant that our factory workers, truck drivers, farmers, salesmen, and other citizens have been subsidizing residents of the Northeast and of sparsely popu-

lated Western states—during which time, ironically, we have had an average income lower than the national average. At the same time, however, our state has become one of the fastest-growing states in the country, bringing new transportation challenges to both urban and rural areas.

When Congress again passed a bill in 1987 that was unfair to North Carolinians, it was apparent to the governor, Harrington and legislative leaders that we would have to address our own needs. After a lengthy process of study and considerable public debate, the General Assembly passed the most visionary transportation legislation in the history of the state, the 1989 Highway Trust Fund Act. The main elements of this landmark legislation are:

- Constructing loops around seven of our major urban centers.
- Doubling the funding for city streets.

- Paving nearly all dirt roads in rural areas. This bold initiative is supported by a menu of revenues that includes driver's license and registration fees, a highway-use tax on motor vehicles, and higher gasoline taxes. The vehicle-based revenues serve to lessen our near-complete reliance on fuel-tax revenues, which have not kept pace with our road needs.

At the same time, programs supporting the other modes of transportation were strengthened through the Highway Trust Fund, which provides up to \$5 million annually to fund alternatives to highways. This money currently is supporting improved passenger rail service between Charlotte and Rocky Mount, as well as preserving rail corridors for future use.

By 1992, when the Congress was due to pass another surface-transportation act, North Carolina had done its homework. By working closely with our congressional delegation and being one in a coalition of "donor" states, we were able to move from a 79 percent return on dollars sent to Washington to an 87.5 percent return—a considerable improvement. These new funds will now support not only traditional road projects, but also high-occupancy vehicle lanes, major improvements to rail corridors, and renovation of historic rail stations as intermodal transportation centers.

Tackling Other Problems

During Martin's tenure, several other transportation initiatives were begun:

- General aviation airports received more reliable and increased funding.

- The administration worked with Triangle-area local government and legislators to organize, nurture, and support the new Triangle Transit Authority.

- The first high-occupancy-vehicle lanes were placed under construction on Independence Boulevard in Charlotte and others have been studied.

New measures to improve efficiency and safety are resulting in cost savings. Some of our grass-mowing and rest area maintenance is now being privately contracted. Safety of the traveling public and of highway construction has been given its rightful prominence. Night-time visibility has been enhanced greatly by a program of placing raised reflectors on all major roads. Wider reflective markings are going on the Interstate system. Many more rail crossings are being signalized and new "Buckeye Crossbucks" are being tried in selective locations.

Strong support for touch drunk-driver legislation and extensive public campaigns for seat-belt usage have resulted in many lives saved. Our overall driver-safety effort resulted in a 10 percent drop in fatalities in 1992—twice the national rate of decrease. In addition, transportation workplace accidents in North Carolina dropped by 30 percent.

On the environmental front, at the urging of First Lady Dottie Martin the Department of Transportation instituted the Adopt-a-Highway and Wildflower Planting programs, which have both become nationally recognized models. We have also emphasized the use of recycled materials in highway construction.

An Unfinished Agenda

Although much progress has been made in the last eight years, there is certainly much more to accomplish. First and foremost, the Highway Trust Fund must be protected from raids. The people of the state were promised those improvements outlined above in return for accepting major increases in highway user fees. Promises must be kept. Until we have substantially completed the statewide system of four-lane roads, urban loops, improved city streets and paved secondary roads, the trust fund should not be tinkered with.

Maintenance needs might be the only exception. We have identified a multi-million-dollar backlog in highway maintenance needs which is growing every day and putting at

risk nearly \$70 billion in investment in roads and bridges. A strong case could be made for setting aside a certain amount of Highway Trust Fund money for the preservation and maintenance of existing roads, be they major or secondary.

Another source of funding for maintenance could be the sales tax on motor-vehicle parts and accessories. In any event, something must be done if North Carolina is to maintain its rightful place as the "Good Roads State."

We also need to keep up the push to achieve greater equity in federal funding. And continued emphasis on driver and worker safety is vitally needed. A champion for driver safety needs to be at the top level of DOT. Historically, there has been a feeling that safety improvements such as raised reflectors, wider lane markings and better signs are somewhat wasteful or superfluous. Certainly concrete, asphalt and steel are important, but well-delineated highways are equally important, especially for our aging population and increasingly inclement weather.

Another new initiative has been to better manage traffic congestion. The effort we started in Winston-Salem to intervene with motorist-assistance patrols, state-of-the-art traffic management systems, and a coordinated multi-agency effort to unclog traffic jams must be spread to our other urban areas. This will not only help in accident prevention but also will help commerce by keeping traffic moving more efficiently.

Finally, we need to continue improving our information systems. DOT used to be on the technological cutting edge, but now it is saddled with antiquated systems in our fiscal section and our Division of Motor Vehicles. We will never be able to serve our citizens in the way they deserve until we employ the latest information technology. This too, is an area in which great cost savings can be found. During a time in which the public is demanding more while resources are tight, we need to look to technology to solve many of our problems.

In my opinion, we have had a progressive eight years. But the challenges are far from over. North Carolina continues to be an economically vibrant, high-growth Sunbelt state. With that growth comes continuing transportation pressures. The state will need to continue responding in creative and innovative ways. Our citizens and our visitors expect and deserve nothing less.



PHOTO BY BILL FAVER

THE TOWHEE gets its name from its sharp, clear call notes, "Tow-he" or "Jo-ree."

RUFIOUS-SIDED TOWHEE

No Sound Cheerier Than Their Call

BY BILL FAVER

Some of the small birds frequenting the roadsides and edges of woods and fields also move into our yards to take advantage of the cover and protection given by shrubs and trees around our houses. One such bird is the Rufous-Sided Towhee, a bird about the size of a robin often found scratching in the leaves and humus under hedges and plants.

The male towhee is black on the head and back, white on the underparts, and has bright robin-red patches on the flanks. The female is brown where the male is black. The rounded tail of both birds flashes white patches in the corners. The birds usually fly close to the ground, pumping their tails as they fly.

The name was given them in 1731 by naturalist Mark Catesby who first discovered the birds in the Carolinas. The name comes from the call note, which sounds like "towhee" or "jo-ree." These birds have been known as Jorees or Ground Robins in many areas of their range. They are found from southern Canada to Florida and spend the entire year with us here in the Carolinas.

Towhees scratch for their food like chickens, ex-

cept that they move both feet at the same time, jumping up as they do. Their noisy scratchings in dry leaves help them expose the insects and seeds which make up their diet. They will come to feeders for small seed and cracked corn. One source suggests that 68% of their food is vegetable such as seeds, wild fruits, and berries. The remainder is made up of caterpillars, bugs, weevils, beetles, flies, and grasshoppers.

Nests may be placed directly on the ground or in low shrubs no more than five feet above ground. Two broods are raised each year, beginning in late April or early May. The first brood may be placed in a nest directly on the ground and the second above ground. The nest itself is a loosely constructed cup made from stems, leaves, twigs and bark, and lined with grasses, roots, and hair.

The female constructs the nest and lays 4-6 white eggs, lightly spotted with reddish-brown. Incubation takes 12-13 days and is performed by the female, although the male bird will bring her food during this time. Young birds leave the nest about the seventh day.

Towhees should be very familiar birds to most of us because of their lack of fear in coming into our yards. Their song of "drink your tea-eeeee" is a welcomed sound. As one faithful bird watcher wrote a few years ago, "Few birds are prettier than the Towhees, and no sound cheerier than their call."



FAVER

Imagine No Bird Island

Reading Lynn's column last week and looking over the pictures for her Under the Sun story reminded me of our recent boat trip through the Mad Inlet marshes and along the windswept beaches of Bird Island.

At the risk of seeming repetitious, I'd like to add my two-cents worth about the urgent need to preserve this last tiny morsel of unspoiled Brunswick County coastline.

Because that's what it is, folks. Our final opportunity to set aside one small piece of home so our children and their children's children can see what a barrier island looks like without roads and houses and fishing piers and real estate offices on it.

Not many of you have ever been to Bird Island. And most of you probably never will. So why should you care if the owner goes ahead with her plan to build a mile-long bridge and causeway system to allow the construction of a 15-lot subdivision there?

Because if Bird Island is developed, future generations of Brunswick County residents will never get the chance to experience what their home coastline looked like in its natural state. They will have to go somewhere else.

When I first moved to the Outer Banks in the mid 1970s, the main road was a bee-line of two-lane pavement that you could shoot a bullet down in wintertime without hitting anything. There wasn't a single fast-food restaurant and only one traffic light in the 75 miles between Kitty Hawk and Hatteras.

Back then, the natives still harbored a major grudge against the National Park Service for strong-arming their ancestors into selling



Eric Carlson

most of the land between Oregon Inlet and Ocracoke for the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. They resented losing the opportunity to profit from the tidal wave of development that everyone saw on the horizon.

Most of them don't feel that way anymore. Today the main road is five lanes wide with stoplights every half mile. All the national restaurant franchises are represented in what the locals call "burger alley." There are department stores and car dealerships and every major motel chain has an oceanfront location. The summer traffic jams are horrendous.

But those natives can still take their grandchildren over the Oregon Inlet Bridge and show them how things were when they were young. They can still walk miles along an empty beach, eat an oyster pulled fresh from Pamlico Sound and see a thousand snow geese explode into the air.

Bird Island is all we have left to show our grandchildren when they ask how things used to be. It's not enough for a national seashore. But future generations deserve a chance to walk that mile of unspoiled beach and gaze out across those acres of rich marshland.

The best way to save Bird Island

is not to put stumbling blocks in the path of the owner's plan to use land that she has every right to develop. That can only lead to conflict and bad feelings.

What's needed is a commitment to the idea of preserving the island from every government official, civic group, environmental organization and business leader in our region. We need to demonstrate to the owner that there is a good-faith effort under way to purchase the land for a fair price, not just a campaign to sabotage and delay development.

Our state representatives need to take the lead in the preservation effort. A state lottery referendum can wait until next year or next decade. The folks in Calabash can tolerate their neighbors a little bit longer without a legislative debate about splitting the town in two.

But if we lose the chance to preserve Bird Island, we can never get it back.

Those of you who think merely in terms of dollars should remember that wild and scenic areas attract as many rent-paying, restaurant-eating, job-creating visitors as any golf course or fishing pier.

Those of you who live inland and feel no attachment to Bird Island should trailer your boat to Calabash, head out Little River Inlet and anchor off the eastern shore. Then take a walk along the beach (below the tide line) and let your mind wander back to a time when all the Brunswick Islands looked like this.

Then imagine describing what you feel to a young child who has never seen an undeveloped coastline. If you can do that, you're a better wordsmith than I.

MORE LETTERS

'Get Off Superintendent's Back'

To the editor:

It seems that lately every time we hear a newscast, Brunswick County schools are a featured item. Unfortunately, it seems always to be negative publicity.

As PTA president at Lincoln Primary School, I am certainly aware that our schools have problems. Every school system has its share, and we are no different.

But I would like to speak in support of our superintendent, Ralph Johnston. Dr. Johnston did not begin as superintendent until Oct. 1, 1992. He knew he was taking on a difficult job made even harder by coming when the school year was already in progress.

He is a good man. He has a vision of what our schools should be. He has a strong moral base, and the motivation to accomplish his goals.

Parents: It is good that you place a high priority on your children's education. But Dr. Johnston is your ally, not your foe. He wants the same things you do. He needs occasionally to hear words of support instead of complaint. He needs sometimes to have a cheering section instead of a jeering section.

County commissioners: I know there are problems between the Board of Education and yourselves. You have some just gripes. But Dr. Johnston is being caught in the political storm between the two boards. He is not the source of the problems. He was not even here when most of them were created. Give him a chance to work with you.

And lastly, the press: I know your business is to report the news, to keep the public informed. But don't make Dr. Johnston your whipping boy. There are plenty of us who can share the blame. Get off his back and give him a chance.

Let's not lose a well-qualified, caring individual who is trying to do his job.

Tina Child
Leland

Energy Tax Unfair

To the editor:

I would like to point out a few things concerning President Clinton's broad-based energy tax pack-

age. This package will tax the hide off people who can't afford it, people who live off Social Security, the very poor who can't pay their bills now, and the great middle class who pay most of the taxes that hold the country together. These are the people who he promised tax relief.

Second, when this bill is passed it will cause everything in the country to increase in price, since everything uses energy. Our light bills, water bills, heat bills, air conditioning, gas for transportation, food and clothing—everything from a toothpick to an apple to an automobile. How about the almost \$40 billion in foreign aid, the homes we are building on the West Bank, land that our own government says is stolen while we are told that millions of Americans are homeless?

This destructive bill reminds me of a song that Phil Harris used to sing called, "The Dark Tused Poker's Club." It went like this: "Keep your bony hands upon the table while you are dealing, please, and don't be slipping any of those aces down between your knees, and stop making all them funny signs like you're trying to tip off your hand. Just keep talking American, American so that I can understand."

Every one of us better contact Charlie Rose and tell him to kill this bill before it kills us.

W.H. Stanley
Calabash

Lifting Ban 'Ridiculous'

To the editor:

With interest I read Eric Carlson's column in the Feb. 11 Beacon concerning President Clinton's plan to lift the official "ban" on gays in the military. I do not agree with him that there is no place in society that should permit unprovoked assaults on individuals such as he described in the incident in Wilmington.

Mr. Carlson may have served in the military as he seems to be talking with authority and experience; however, he sees the lifting of the "ban" differently than I do. I was drafted into the military and, as most everyone that served, I had to sleep in two-man pup tents, eat and shower together and were closely con-

fined.

I then read about the AIDS virus being spread 50 percent by male homosexuals. The fact that President Clinton would declare this as an acceptable lifestyle is very disturbing to me, especially when we are trying to cure AIDS. Permitting them to serve openly in the military is ridiculous to me.

In my opinion when President Clinton said he would lift the "ban" on homosexuals in the armed services, the news media have taken the 10 percent that agree with him and have tried to make the other 90 percent think it is a majority.

David Combs
Spencer, W.Va.

Don't Mess Up News

To the editor:

This letter is in reference to an article appearing in the Feb. 18 issue of the Beacon regarding a father pleading guilty to charges that he sexually molested his daughters. In this otherwise valid news story, the reporter chose to incorporate into the article those details as to precisely how the father violated his daughters.

Is it necessary or proper to report in graphic detail bedroom and bathroom scenes involving the father and his daughters? Is there any redeeming news or social value contained in those portions of the article? The mere fact that the father admits his transgressions is sufficient information in this case and the methods he used to satiate his sexual appetite are superfluous.

There is disturbing trend in this direction nationally, and newspapers' constitutional guarantees to print almost anything they choose appears to have become accepted legal tenet. I would hope that the Beacon staff is not following this form of reporting as part of journalistic competition.

Two Beacon staff members were recently honored for excellence in their chosen profession, but not for reporting details such as indicated above. You have a very good newspaper. Don't mess it up!

Francis W. Niland
Shallotte