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In Swain, a road to the future



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GUEST
OPINION

Sixty-three years is a long time to wait for a promise to be fulfilled. Swain County has been waiting since 1943 to be compensated for the loss of a road when the federal government created Fontana Lake.

For three generations the community has sought closure and, at last, the issue may soon be resolved. The National Park Service is evaluating options to

keep the government's promise, whether in the form of a cash settlement to the county or construction of a new road. The road, should it be built, would cut through a pristine part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and do tremendous environmental harm.

In 2006, the Southern Environmental Law Center commissioned Warren Wilson College's Environmental Leadership Center to develop an analysis contrasting the economic benefits of a cash settlement with building a road.

Many Swain County residents have long opted for a cash settlement, as reflected by the election of a pro-settlement county commission in 2002, and again on Nov. 7, and by large turnouts at park service hearings on the issue. The cash option also has strong regional support in Congressman-elect Heath Shuler who campaigned for the cash settlement, as well as from the governors of North Carolina and Tennessee.

The county has proposed settlement of \$52 million, based on the cost of the original road and factored for inflation. At the time of the economic analysis, the North Shore Road was estimated to cost \$604 million. Shortly after, the park service upped the estimate to \$600 million, and is now re-evaluating the cost again. A cash settlement is the fiscally prudent solution for the American taxpayer, and especially for Swain County, a rural county with more than 80 percent of its land in federal ownership.

The economic analysis engaged many Swain County leaders. Its main finding was that a cash settlement would yield far greater and longer term economic benefits, and empower the county with the much-needed flexibility to respond to its citizens' needs and diversify its economy over time. Swain County already approaches full employment at the height of the tourist season; the economic analysis shows that building a new road through the national park would only bind the county ever more tightly to its economic base of seasonal, low-wage labor force.

Other findings include the following:

■ In 2005, 35 percent of the private sector labor force of Swain County worked in tourism-related jobs, with wages averaging \$16,000 annually.

■ The interest from a \$52 million settlement could grow to an average of \$3.5 million in

income per year.

■ The cash settlement could give Swain County an immediate economic boost to, for example, increase salaries for teachers, police and emergency service personnel; to reduce property taxes; and to support capital projects such as improvements to schools, medical facilities, and water/sewer systems.

■ By contrast, another generation would pass before any economic benefits from the road would be realized, as the National Park Service has acknowledged the road would take at least 15 years to build —

and it's a long way off from even starting.

■ A \$52 million settlement

could result in 78 permanent, higher paying jobs in Swain County, compared to 110 primarily seasonal, low-paying tourism jobs from the North Shore Road. This economic analysis was submitted to the park service during the official public comment period. The agency is expected to finalize its environmental impact study

on the issue soon. The decision rests with the new leader of the park service, Mary Bomar, who has the power to make the right choice based on these facts. Visit www.warren-wilson.edu/~elc/Economics.shtml to read the background for these conclusions.

The data is solid and very clear — the cash settlement

will allow Swain County to pave its own way to the future, diversify its economy, provide needed infrastructure, and secure its financial well-being for generations to come.

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