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The New York Times

The Road to Nowhere

It seems insane that the National Park Service would even think of spending \$600 million on a road that few people want and nobody needs — especially when the service has barely enough money to keep up appearances. But that could happen unless the Interior Department musters the courage to resist Representative Charles Taylor of North Carolina.

Mr. Taylor, who says a new road would stimulate the local economy, runs the subcommittee that controls the Interior Department's budget. For that reason, neither the park service nor Interior's outgoing secretary, Gale Norton, has publicly criticized the idea. But there is more at stake here than pleasing one's paymaster. The road would not only blow a hole in the department's budget; it would also leave a scar on one of the most popular national parks.

At issue is a 30-mile road proposed for the north side of Fontana Lake on the eastern edge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. The road was promised to the residents of Swain County in 1943 when the Tennessee Valley Authority built a major hydroelectric dam, creating the lake and flooding out an existing road. After a fitful start in the 1970's, the road project was aban-

doned for environmental and budgetary reasons.

Those reasons still apply. The road, including three big bridges, each the length of the Brooklyn Bridge, would breach an unbroken tract of national forest, destroy wildlife habitat and poison hundreds of miles of streams. Its estimated cost of \$604 million — up 40 percent from only a year ago — is three times the annual roads budget for the entire national park system, which is already suffering from a big repair backlog.

There is no pressing need for the project. Swain County has other roads. The road's opponents include Bill Frist, the Senate majority leader, and Swain County's own commissioners. There is broad agreement that restitution of some sort is due the residents of the region, and that the spirit if not the letter of the original agreement should be honored. A cash settlement of \$52 million has been proposed.

As Mr. Taylor has noted, this will not generate the jobs and income that the road project would. But it's fair, and it won't do lasting damage. Interior should endorse the settlement. The department's neutrality serves only to keep alive an idea that makes even less sense now than it did in 1943.

[NOTE: The fourth paragraph makes an erroneous reference to the road going through a national forest, rather than a national park. The New York *Times* ran a correction on this the following day.]