

Interstate Impasse

Where I-3 Met the Mountains

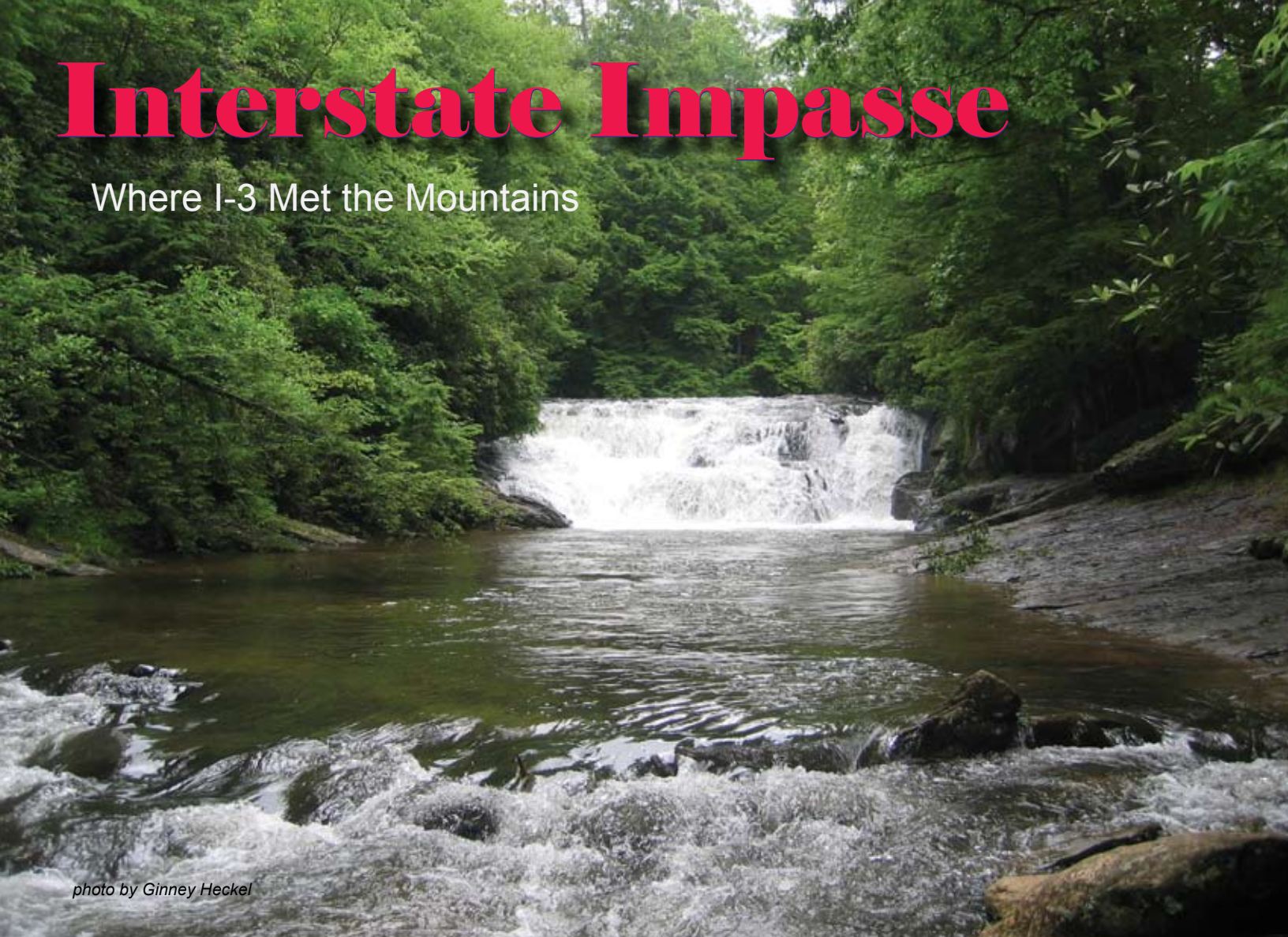


photo by Ginney Heckel

The fight began innocently enough, just a congressman proposing a way to bring some federal funding back home to Georgia with a plan to pour it out in ribbons of black asphalt routing commerce to rural areas of the state. Better yet, these roads proposed to the United States Congress in Bill HR 301 and S 459 could reduce the infamous gridlock of Atlanta traffic by offering alternative routes for northeastern travelers headed to Florida via Interstate 3, and eastern travelers headed west on Interstate 14. The announcement was largely met with shrugs across Georgia, until the news began reverberating through the mountain communities.

Affection for the mountains of North Georgia, western North Carolina and east Tennessee is proving to be a unifying force. Once the news broke in June 2005 of proposed legislation to fund a \$400,000 feasibility study for the two new interstates in Georgia, citizen opposition began organizing within days.

Chapters of the Stop I-3 Coalition were springing up in

Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee. By the time the feasibility funding was approved in August as part of the Transportation Equity Act of 2005, the amount had tripled to \$1,200,000, and officials in Georgia's northeastern counties of Habersham, Rabun and White had already publicly resolved to fight.

Almost two years later the proposal for I-14, connecting Augusta westward to Natchez, Mississippi via Macon, Georgia and Montgomery, Alabama is largely unchallenged as a corridor of economic opportunity for the region, bringing "interstate equity to the South" as the late Charlie Norwood, 10th District Congressional Representative and co-sponsor of the legislation, had promised. I-3, proposed to connect Savannah to Knoxville, has become quite another story.

Early on some I-3 proponents claimed that only fringe groups in the small communities opposed the construction of an interstate through the rugged, environmentally sacrosanct Appalachian Mountains.

Counting the full-time North Georgia Mountains residents as the only opposition might have been a serious miscalculation. Seasonal population counts rise by the tens of thousands here in the *Far North of the Deep South*, and these part-timers seem as protective of the territory as the fast growing resident population.

I-3 objectors run the gamut from environmental activists and vacationing families to sports car club members. Fayette County resident Joan Moldenhauer, a member of the Z Series Car Club, offers her opinion. "One of the earlier proposed routes showed I-3 would literally blast its way through the Tail of the Dragon, an historic national treasure revered by car clubs for over fifty years. It's a classic mountain road packed with hairpin turns, bordering the Smokey Mountains National Park."

"I've met sports car enthusiasts and motorcyclists visiting from nations around the world," she adds, "who have come to ride this exhilarating, renowned stretch of Highway 129. It's absurd. All of this proposed destruction and I-3 will be just 15 miles shorter than existing interstate routes between Savannah and Knoxville?"

Interviews with past and present state and federal insiders suggest that I-3 will survive the feasibility study as an interstate route from Savannah connecting to I-85 near Augusta. This downsized option would still provide the roadways predicted to relieve Atlanta's congestion, without venturing into Georgia's high country.

The feasibility study has yet to get underway, and with the Congress asking the U. S. Department of Transportation to recommend \$3.47 billion previously approved appropriations for de-funding, the feds passed on that request for recommendations to the states. Stop I-3 coalition members rallied opponents to forward suggestions that the Georgia Interstate feasibility studies top the Georgia DOT's de-funding list. The state recommendations were due in D.C. on April 18, and at press time no decisions had been announced. Visit www.stopi-3.org for new releases.

In developing this update story on I-3, the editors of North Georgia Mountains Magazine asked candidates in the June 19 race for the 10th Congressional District seat left vacant by the death of Congressman Charlie Norwood in February, to share their positions on I-3 with our readers. Here are the responses from nine of the ten candidates; along with website addresses



photo by Ginney Heckel

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should you like to know more about the race:

I do not see a need for the proposed I-3 at this time. I will study what need there is for federal road projects and I will support these in the most cost effective way. I would rather leave money in the pockets of North Georgians than spend it on unnecessary pork barrel projects.

Dr. Paul Broun, Jr.
Candidate for the 10th Congressional District
Party Affiliation: Republican
www.paulbroun.com

As a child from Franklin County, Georgia, I grew up enjoying the hiking trails and camping at the state parks. I have shared these same experiences with my children and one day I hope to share it with my grandchildren. I've always been in awe of these mountains and the tranquility they invoke.

In the name of progress, some propose putting an interstate highway, I-3, through these mountains to make travel from one place to another a few minutes faster -- about 4 minutes faster, by some calculations. At the heart of the issues related to growth is that each community should decide for itself what progress is or is not.

Yes, we all desire our communities to develop, but not at the expense of our environment, natural resources, and our way of life. There is much at stake and seemingly little to benefit from to justify cutting an interstate through these mountains. I-3 would divert traffic from the local communities, thus having a negative impact on local economies. There are also environmental problems we can encounter: more pollution in our lakes, a decrease in wildlife population, and an increase in air pollution. These mountains also have some of the best fishing, camping, hiking trails, national forests, plant life, wildlife, state parks, and the highest peaks in Georgia.

I've talked with many of the citizens in the affected counties and have read articles addressing this matter. I will work to preserve the areas that we need to protect, according to the desires of the people of this district.

I, Denise Freeman pledge to support and represent your interests as the next Congressional Representative of the 10th District.
Party Affiliation: Democrat
www.freemanforcongress2007.com

On any request for Congressional funding, for any project, I will apply two simple requirements as an elected Representative: (1) Is it morally and ethnically right to do? (2) Is it Constitutionally permissible for Congress to do?

Regarding the proposal to construct an I-3 highway in north Georgia: while such a project may be Constitutionally permissible under Article I, Section 8, it is simply not morally right to construct such a highway against the overwhelmingly expressed wishes of the residents of that area.

Therefore, I would oppose the current proposal to construct an I-3 highway in north Georgia.

Bill Greene
Candidate for 10th Congressional District
Party Affiliation: Republican
www.billgreeneforcongress.com



photo by Gimney Heckel

I am opposed to I-3 in North Georgia because I believe that interstate highways in places like the North Georgia Mountains are devastating to the environment and to small towns.

Rather than just opposing I-3, however, I suggest that we look at a different plan, one that would use funds that would have been spent on the road to improve the environment and communities of the Tenth District. I would like to help create something like the Silver Comet Trail in Northeast Georgia, finish the Bartram Trail, build new parks and improve existing ones, and invest in other ways in the rural areas of the district. I believe that protecting the natural resources of places like the Tenth District is not only good environmental policy, but is also a way to create sustainable economic development by encouraging ecotourism.

James Marlow
Democratic Candidate for District 10
Congressional House Seat
www.marlowforcongress.com

I will represent the people in the 10th district. If the people do not want the Interstate, it will not be built. Northeast Georgia can continue to grow and prosper without I - 3.

Mark Myers
Candidate for 10th Congressional
District
Party Affiliation: Republican
www.markmyersforcongress.com

I am totally against I-3 because the residents of the 10th Congressional District do not want it.

Evita Paschall
Candidate for the 10th Congressional
District
Party Affiliation: Democrat
voteevitapaschall.org



Tail of the Dragon veteran and Sports car enthusiast Joan Moldenhauer argues against the mountain segment of the proposed Interstate 3.

My position is that if the people of northeast Georgia do not want I-3, it should not be constructed. It would have an adverse impact on the environment in the beautiful north Georgia mountains.

Nate Pulliam
Candidate for the 10th Congressional
District
Party Affiliation: Republican
www.natepulliam.com

Running as a Republican, I believe in the democratic form of government. I believe folks impacted by decisions have a say in decisions that come out of Washington D. C.

Having talked with people in the areas the proposed interstate will affect, I stand with those people and do not believe I-3 should be extended into the mountain areas. My hope is that these people's voices can be heard. I stand with the people on this.

Erik Underwood
Candidate for the 10th District of
Georgia
Party Affiliation: Republican
www.campaignwindow.com/underwoodforcongress

I support the construction of a new Interstate 3 linking Savannah, Augusta, and I-85. I believe we can achieve nearly

all the economic benefit of the original I-3 proposal between Savannah and Knoxville, Tennessee at half the cost by ending construction at I-85. This would avoid new road-building in the mountains, and provide a quicker start and completion time for the counties that are clamoring the loudest for the project.

In addition, I support a new Interstate 14 linking Augusta, Macon, and Columbus, Georgia, with Montgomery, Alabama, and Natchez, Mississippi.

Jim Whitehead
Candidate for the 10th District of
Georgia
Party Affiliation: Republican
whiteheadforcongress.com

The special election
will be held on
Tuesday, June 19.
If no candidate
receives a majority
of the vote, a run-off
election will be held
Tuesday, July 17.