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W.Va. 2: Legislators must keep hands off funding

Gov. Jim Justice's suggestion that some funds earmarked for "*Roads to Prosperity*" highway and bridge projects could be diverted to handle secondary road maintenance already has received some criticism.

Mountain State voters who approved the \$1.6 billion Roads to Prosperity bond issue were promised proceeds would be used for hundreds of specific projects throughout the state. No doubt many votes were based on pledges of improvements to roads in some voters' areas.

Cutting back substantially or eliminating those projects would be wrong. Not an unprecedented tactic, maybe, but wrong.

Fortunately, Mid-Ohio Valley residents have an effective advocate in that regard — the West Virginia Route 2/I-68 Authority. It was created many years ago to promote improvements to W.Va. 2. Later, its role expanded to include proposed extension of Interstate 68 to the Ohio River from its current terminus near Morgantown.

For some time, state Sen. Charles Clements, R-Wetzel, has served as executive director of the authority. His efforts paid off with state promises to upgrade new sections of W.Va. 2 to four-lane status.

New executive director, former Marshall County Commissioner Robert Miller understands the importance of W.Va. 2 and objects to any suggestion Roads to Prosperity funding for that work be reduced.

A \$6 million project to replace the W.Va. 2 bridge at Proctor already is underway. It is expected to be completed by late this summer.

But the bulk of the Roads to Prosperity plan on W.Va. 2 involves two separate projects to upgrade the highway to four lanes over a distance of about seven miles, a little up the river. About \$110 million has been earmarked for that work.

It needs to be emphasized that no one in Charleston has suggested reducing the W.Va. 2 projects to provide maintenance funds for secondary roads elsewhere in the state. Still, \$110 million would be a tempting target for those searching for money by that means.

Don't even think about it. Motorists who use W.Va. 2 frequently have waited for decades, even generations, for the proposed upgrades to happen. Disappointing them now would be a return to political practices voters have done their best to eradicate. It would not be right — or politically prudent.
