

U.S. 11 and I-81: Location Difficulties in Virginia

Series: FHWA Highway History Website Articles

June 2023

The original format of this document was an active HTML page(s) located under <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/history.cfm>. The Federal Highway Administration converted the HTML page(s) into an Adobe® Acrobat® PDF file to preserve and support reuse of the information it contained.

The intellectual content of this PDF is an authentic capture of the original HTML file. Hyperlinks and other functions of the HTML webpage may have been lost, and this version of the content may not fully work with screen reading software.

U.S. 11 and I-81 Location Difficulties in Virginia

In February and March 1998, John T. Greenwood interviewed Francis C. "Frank" Turner for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' 1988 Interstate Highway Research Project. Turner, who had joined the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads in 1929, rose through the ranks to become Federal Highway Administrator (1969-1972). In the 1950s, as Special Assistant to the Commissioner of Public Roads, he had been the agency's liaison to the Clay Committee, which developed the highway proposal President Dwight D. Eisenhower submitted to Congress in 1955, and the Senate and House Committees on Public Works. As a result, he was involved in many of the decisions at the start of the Interstate program, and during its most active years.

At one point during an interview on March 21, Greenwood asked Turner about State opposition to the program. While discussing that subject, Turner turned to a related topic:

Turner: And we had several others who were—who had questions about certain pieces of it, not necessarily the routes at that time, because they weren't—hadn't gotten that far along. But certain concepts and some of it was on the basis of cost, was prohibitive in cost and extravagant and all this and that.

Virginia was one of them when we got into the actual locations on the ground and one thing and another. They—a classic example was old route 11 that runs down the valley, there, now Interstate 81. The head of the highway department at that time was a Reserve Brigadier General—

Greenwood: Anderson?

Turner: Anderson, Jimmy Anderson.

Greenwood: Yes.

Turner: A graduate of VMI, as most of the highway department people in Virginia are. In fact, it was by tradition a superintendent of VMI became the chief of the highway department in Virginia or vice versa. And General Jimmy Anderson was the head of the highway department at that time.

A Virginia gentleman of the highest order and everything, but hard-headed as all get-out, and particularly with respect to the crazy federal idea of an Interstate system. "You don't need such a thing as that. We've got adequate highways in Virginia. Who are the feds to be telling us how to build our highways in Virginia anyway?" That is still the war between the states going on, of course.

But he was a very fine guy. I'm not—I mean that. He was a gentleman. We could argue and beat each other over the head and things like that, but never any personalities involved. He was a great guy.

But we had great difficulty getting Virginia to come up to the standards. They thought—Jimmy Anderson virtually was the one who was most adamant on it. And outspoken. And he was the head of the highway department, and of course, everybody took their cue from him. Not all of his people really believed in it that way, but one of the classic examples was when we got into the question of making the location for the cost estimate, in the state, he proposed down through the valley that we leave Route 11, old U.S. 11 that runs down through there, alone. It was adequate. I don't know if you were around at that time or not, but 11 at that time was a two-lane road and had—its superhighway status was where it had been widened

to three lanes, so that you had two lines in one direction here for a while, and one lane in the other direction. And then you come back to two lanes, and then you might have three lanes, you might have two lanes on the outside and a common passing lane in the middle, which was a suicide lane, of course.

And this is the way that U.S. 11 was built all the way from Pennsylvania to Tennessee. And the General claimed that this was all that Virginia needed. And to do anything other than that was totally-a total waste of money, even to widen it to four lanes, uniform. Didn't need that.

Finally he agreed, yes, that they would have to accept something. They didn't like it. They thought it was wrong. But they would have to accept it. And he came screaming and being drug into the 20th century and he proposed, then, that the location be such that we left 11 essentially as it was, but we would locate Interstate 81 in such a way that we would go down one side off to the side of 11, here, half a mile or so, for several miles and then we would cross 11 and get on the other side and we would go down that way.

And we would whip back and forth across 11 all the way down, as I say, from Pennsylvania to the Tennessee border. And his reasoning was that the valley was hallowed historic battle ground land, sacred, inviolate, and that we would do the interchanges by these crossings of the existing road, about every three or four miles, so that, then, would take care of the local service. Wouldn't have to build frontage roads or anything. And we would make an interchange there. But whether we needed to cross there or not we would deliberately swing across and just zigzag back and forth all the way down through the state down there.

Well, we got a few of those designs made on a trial basis and they looked so unsatisfactory and so artificial and didn't really do the job that any of us wanted, and finally it came around to what it is now, of course.

Basically, you have got 81 built on a complete new location all the way down there, everywhere.

After discussing the Federal-State relationship under the Federal-aid highway program, Turner returned briefly to the I-81 example:

The states still have to go through the legal process of initiating the project, but if they don't agree with it, then theoretically they don't have to submit it, but they are not going to do that in the case of the Interstate system.

The DOT position has been that "we are in the driver's seat and we will tell the states how they are going to do it and what they can and cannot do." And going back to the case of, that I was talking about a while ago, of how we were going to design I-81 down in the valley here, and if Jimmy Anderson wanted to do it, he could do it like this and propose it that way.

We had to approve or disapprove of that. And if he disapproved of it, he could just sit back and say, "Okay, you guys. I'll build it. And you can't do anything about it." And he could have. But because of the money involved, which he couldn't finance, of course, we were going to put in 90 percent if he did it our way, why, he really had no choice.
