

Highway would ravage east coast

CONGRATULATIONS TO PREMIER Yu Shi-yi-kun and his administration for making the right decision on the Su Ao-Hualien Highway.

A day saved is a day's victory for those whose ancient homes will be devastated if the road is built.

It is also a victory for others (that is, all of us) who benefit from the wealth of Taiwan's east coast. Benefits come in the form of plant and animal (including human) diversity both on the land and in the sea, fresh air generated by an important part of "Taiwan's lungs," clean water and some of the world's most spectacular scenery.

Taiwan has nearly the highest number of plant and animal species per square kilometer in the world. But the Su Ao-Hualien Highway project is a child of the 50-year ecological disaster that governments both new and old have been foisting on all inhabitants of Taiwan in the name of "development." The ill-conceived highway would be a boon only to the cement, mining and construction businesses that now follow the east coast from Ilan to Hualien, and a few government officials who might get some money out of it, and who will have something to point at so they can say "look what we're doing."

Jobs? One need only to visit the construction sites around the county to know that any jobs created in the area would likely go to underpaid, imported labor from

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Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. And, surely there are more meaningful jobs that might be found in the tourism and agriculture sectors.

But how will people get to the east coast if we don't build this highway?

There is already a highway. Hualien's airport has been expanded considerably. The Taiwan Railway Administration is in the process of completing its expansion of rail service, which will shorten travel times by 30 percent and at the same time significantly increase capacity. Moreover, does anyone remember the ferry service from Keelung to Hualien? Maybe it is time to take it out of mothballs.

Media coverage of this issue doesn't take into account several key issues that lie behind the decision to stop construction of the portion of the east coast Highway from Su Ao to Hualien. While some news reports note an environmental impact study and say that the EPA "approved" the project, they leave out an important word — "conditional."

However, we shouldn't even be so charitable, for the environmental study was severely flawed in its assumptions and methodology.

But even allowing the study to stand, the Department of National Highways has to this day failed

to address the reservations contained in the report that it commissioned, despite written interpolations from legislators and queries from concerned groups (cultural, academic, business, environmental and indigenous).

The concerns range from the gash that will run through a number of Aboriginal villages (Taroko-Atayal), the dumping of tunnel "waste" in the ocean off the east coast, the horrendous impact on the affected areas' watersheds and a litany of local environmental issues.

What is most telling, however, is that a cost/benefit analysis has not been done. That is, not one government agency has begun work on the basic evaluation that must be performed after the conditions in the environmental assessment report have been resolved (if indeed they can be resolved). Surprising? Perhaps, but they have just been putting off the inevitable, for the analysis will surely come up short, bringing the entire project into question.

Nor have administrative agencies (Ministry of Transportation and Communications, Council for Economic Planning and Development, Environmental Protection Administration and so on) followed their own internal procedures. While this would have been standard procedure under the old government, we expect more from a government that espouses transparency.

Yes, politics has played a major role in the project. A very

sweet business opportunity lies along the east coast. It may have been sweeter during the bygone days when People First Party Chairman James Soong (宋楚瑜) was governor of "Taiwan Province" and could manipulate billions of dollars in questionable transactions.

But even today the administration of President Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) seems unable or unwilling to say no to local governments and their environmentally challenged east coast contractor cronies.

The business groups that control the cement factories have a lot at stake here, and they are but the tip of the iceberg of those seeking a million ways to create "business opportunities." As long as these businesses have excess capacity — and they certainly will, as long as the government continues to heavily subsidize their utilities, transportation and labor — there will be immense pressure to open up and spread concrete and asphalt over the entire area of Taiwan's east coast counties.

Taiwan needs all of our help at this critical moment. Taiwan also needs business, but not the kind of absentee plundering that has gone on for the past 50 years and that now critically threatens our east coast.

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