

U.S. House advances effort to pull funds from controversial I-80 rockfall project

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By **John Best** | lehighvalleylive.com contributor

An amendment passed Thursday in the U.S. House of Representatives that seeks defund the controversial Interstate 80 rockfall mitigation project in the Delaware Water Gap.

New Jersey Congressman Josh Gottheimer, who represents the Garden State communities surrounding the proposed project site, introduced the amendment aimed at the Federal Highway Administration budget for the next fiscal year.

The amendment seeks “to emphasize the importance of federal money not being used for the construction of an artificial wall between mile posts 1.04 and 1.45 along Interstate 80 in Knowlton and Hardwick Townships, New Jersey.”

The New Jersey Department of Transportation has proposed excavating and installing sections of wire mesh and fence on the cliffs along I-80 where it winds through the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

The area on I-80 has the highest risk of rockfall of anywhere on New Jersey’s highways, according to the DOT.

Warren County and multiple municipalities in New Jersey and across the Delaware River in Pennsylvania have passed resolutions stating opposition to the project. Opponents say the DOT has not provided evidence that the dangers occur frequently enough to require an unsightly fence being built in a scenic area.

In a statement, Gottheimer said he recognizes the need for keeping roads safe, however, the current project is not the right direction toward that end.

“Unfortunately, this 60-foot-high wall will do more harm than good,” Gottheimer said. “The local economy in Warren County relies on tourism to the beautiful Delaware Water Gap -- one of New Jersey’s greatest natural treasures.”

The current estimate for the project is \$47 million. The DOT is relying on money coming from federal funds.

Gottheimer said the amendment “will push the pause button on that project officially.”

Federal money should be utilized for a safer, evidence-based, and eco-friendly solution, for that stretch of highway, he said.

“This is a huge development and a testament to Rep. Gottheimer’s relentless effort along with the other legislators in this area who have supported Knowlton Township on this issue,” Knowlton Township Mayor Adele Starrs said of the amendment.

The U.S. Senate still needs to take up the appropriations bill that includes Gottheimer’s amendment. Its fate remains uncertain.

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