

MEMORANDUM

TO: Transportation Advisory Committee of the French Broad River MPO
CC: Technical Coordinating Committee of the French Broad River MPO
DATE: 7/17/07
FROM: Dan Baechtold, MPO Coordinator
SUBJECT: Proposed Change to I-26 Connector Alternatives

The purpose of this memo is to brief you on a proposed change to the I-26 Connector project in Asheville.

NCDOT has called a special meeting of the NEPA/Merger Team for the I-26 Connector project. The meeting is to be held on July 24, 2007 in Raleigh. Dan Baechtold is the MPO representative to the Merger Team. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss removal of Alternate 5 from consideration.

According to the agenda packet for the meeting distributed by NCDOT: *"The meeting is being held to review and recommend the elimination of Section B Alternative 5 from further consideration and also to modify Concurrence Point 2, 'Alternatives to be Studied in Detail' to reflect this decision".* The MPO will be asked to officially concur with this decision (agenda packet attached).

The agenda packet also states the reason for the NCDOT recommendation: *"After the development of preliminary designs, further investigations into the operations suggests there is potential for Alternative 5 to exacerbate an existing weaving condition along I-240 between the US 19-23 and Montford Avenue interchanges."*

This change is significant based on the history of the public involvement process for the project. At this point MPO staff plans to gather all of the available information, brief the Transportation Advisory Committee, and receive direction from the TAC. MPO staff discussed the issue with TAC Chairman Chuck McGrady and he agreed with this approach. Chairman McGrady recommended that we ask TAC members to hold open the date of Thursday August 16, 2006 for a possible TAC meeting at noon.

Background

There are four alternatives currently being studied (Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5). Alternatives 2 and 3 were presented by the NCDOT in 1998. These two options generated a lot of concern in the community. The Asheville City Council requested an opportunity for additional community input. As a result, a NCDOT held a community design forum in July of 2000. The design forum generated new ideas for the project and was generally hailed as a model for community participation.

In this same timeframe, NCDOT and the City of Asheville created a Community Coordinating Committee (CCC). The CCC issued a report that was adopted by the Asheville City Council and the MPO TAC in September of 2000. The report is attached. One of the recommendations of the report was to separate I-240 traffic from Patton Avenue traffic (alternatives 2 and 3 don't do this).

Working through the CCC process, NCDOT developed Alternatives 4 and 5 in 2000 and 2001 based on the community input, and based on the recommendation to separate I-240 traffic from Patton Avenue traffic. These are the only two alternatives that achieve this separation. It should be noted that although the CCC report recommends this traffic separation, it is not part of the official "Purpose and Need Statement" for the Connector project. ("Purpose and Need" is Step 1 of the Merger Process.)

The traffic separation achieved by Alternatives 4 and 5 has several potential positive impacts from the perspective of MPO staff, namely: 1) creating a local boulevard between downtown and west Asheville; 2) creating connections for bicyclists and pedestrians; 3) simplifying movements on the east side of the

river; 4) opening land for additional urban scale development; 5) re-connecting the low-income neighborhood of Hillcrest which was isolated by past highway projects.

These four alternatives have been under study since 2001. They were presented to the community as part of a public workshop in the fall of 2006. NCDOT expects to release the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in the fall of 2007.

It should also be noted that the alternative that has been recently proposed by the Asheville Design Center is not officially in the EIS process as an "Alternative to be Studied in Detail." (Step 2 of the Merger Process).

To reiterate, the meeting on July 24, 2007 is to discuss a recommendation by NCDOT to remove Alternative 5 from consideration. If you have any questions please contact Dan Baechtold at 259-5842.