THE STRATEGIC HIGHWAY CORRIDORS REGIONAL FORUMS

Prepared by:

February 2004

This page intentionally left blank.

Regional Forums

What was the Purpose of the Forums and Where were they Held?

Between November 2003 and January 2004, NCDOT staff held a series of public meetings (regional forums) throughout North Carolina to share the Strategic Highway Corridors concept with stakeholders and gather their reactions in order to share input with management and the Board of Transportation. The three major objectives for the public forums were to:

- Educate stakeholders about the overall Strategic Highway Corridors concept.
- Gather stakeholders' reactions, ideas and critical issues about Strategic Highway Corridors concept.
- Educate stakeholders about next steps and timeframes in the planning process.

As part of this effort, NCDOT engaged the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and the North Carolina Department of Commerce to partner and participate in the public involvement process. NCDOT contracted with the Triangle-based consulting firm AH HA! to help design and facilitate these forums.

Nine public forums were held throughout North Carolina (three in each of the geographic areas described below). The three geographic regions tended to share common concerns and are similar in physical and natural features. The forums were held in both urban and rural areas. This outreach approach was structured to ensure that both broad statewide and unique regional perspectives would be heard. The forums were held at community colleges, town halls, civic centers, and other popular meeting places. In choosing venues the NCDOT team sought ease of access and ample parking; audio/visual capabilities; good lighting and sufficient space. Each forum lasted two and a half hours and a variety of techniques were used to publicize these forums, including email, brochures, and announcements via newsletters and listserves.

West

- Bryson City - Nantahala Village, Mountain Resort & Meeting Center (November 18th, 2003)
- Wilkesboro - John H. Wilkes Community College (November 19th, 2003)
- Asheville - NC Arboretum (November 20th, 2003)

East

- Jacksonville - Commons Recreation Center (December 9th, 2003)
- Wilson - Wilson Tech Community College (December 10th, 2003)
- Williamston - Bob Martin Agricultural Center (January 22nd, 2004)

Central

- Huntersville - Town Hall (January 13th, 2004)
- Southern Pines - Douglass Community Center (January 14th, 2004)
- Greensboro - Guilford Tech Community College (January 15th, 2004)

These forums also supplemented the work done by Board of Transportation members to inform citizens of this new planning concept. One Board member in particular, Cam McRae, was instrumental in responding to numerous requests and making presentations to interested citizens in eastern North Carolina. Board Member McRae was proactive in helping to shape the early development of the corridor concept and has championed its importance to the public at-large.

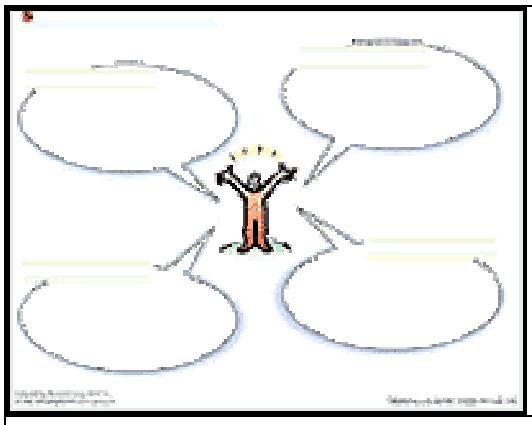
Since the Strategic Highway Corridors concept represents a new planning direction, NCDOT initially chose to engage those stakeholders who have a vested interest in the conceptual planning aspects of Strategic Highway Corridors (versus those with an interest in project specific details). Targeted stakeholders included local, state and federal agencies, economic development and environmental organizations, freight industry representatives, regional and local planning agencies, political leadership organizations, and other advocacy groups. Approximately 250 people attended the forums, with an average of 25-28 people attending per forum.

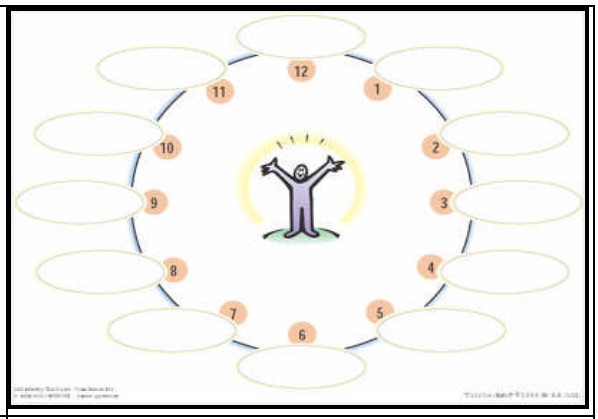
How were the Forums Structured?

The public forums were designed to promote open, honest exchange between NCDOT and the participants. At the same time they were tightly structured so that all parties could move forward productively. Each room was pre-arranged with roundtables of 6-8 people per table in order to promote a conversational tone. Each table had table sized graphic templates (see next page) taped on it, along with sticky notes and pens for participants. NCDOT also prepared handouts (see next page) on the Strategic Highway Corridors concept as a takeaway for participants. The forum agenda, outcomes, roles and rules were displayed prominently on wall-sized templates.

Visual frameworks such as graphics templates were used to capture and organize participants' ideas, questions and issues at the forums. When graphics templates are used, people become engaged in the process of sharing, listening, and building upon each other's ideas. As this happened, participants began to see (in the most literal sense) the big picture, and connections emerged. All participants had an opportunity to give individual input through the use of sticky notes that they placed on table graphic templates. AH HA! captured comments made during the full group conversations on wall-sized templates. These templates also aided in organizing the data collected at each of the sessions.

Examples of the Graphic Templates used during the Public Forums

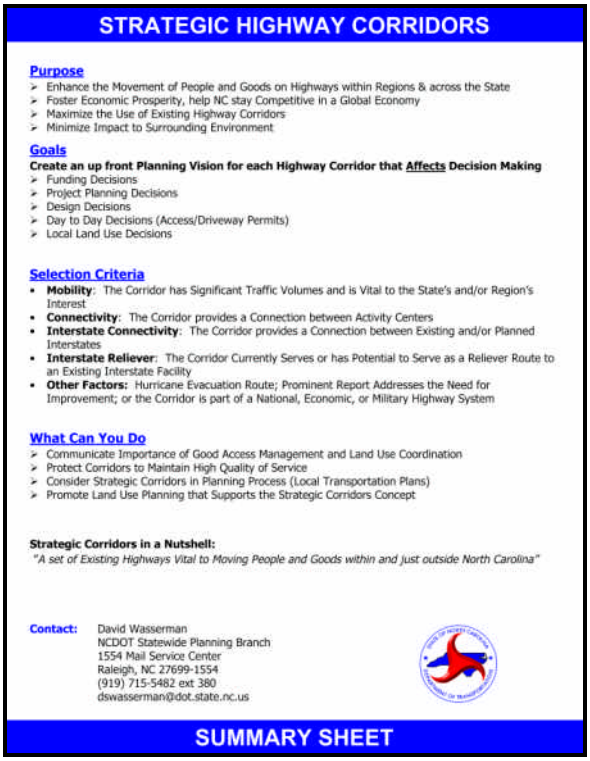




"Speaking Our Minds" *- provides a format for articulation of questions, ideas and issues*

"Circle Around" *- Holistically capture story themes and map related differences.*

Handouts Provided at the Public Forums



STRATEGIC HIGHWAY CORRIDORS

Purpose
- Enhance the Movement of People and Goods on Highways within Regions & across the State
- Foster Economic Prosperity, help NC stay Competitive in a Global Economy
- Maximize the Use of Existing Highway Corridors
- Minimize Impact to Surrounding Environment

Goals

Create an up front Planning Vision for each Highway Corridor that Affects Decision Making
- Funding Decisions
- Project Planning Decisions
- Design Decisions
- Day to Day Decisions (Access/Driveway Permits)
- Local Land Use Decisions

Selection Criteria
- **Mobility**: The Corridor has Significant Traffic Volumes and is Vital to the State's and/or Region's Interest
- **Connectivity**: The Corridor provides a Connection between Activity Centers
- **Interstate Connectivity**: The Corridor provides a Connection between Existing and/or Planned Interstates
- **Interstate Reliever**: The Corridor Currently Serves or has Potential to Serve as a Reliever Route to an Existing Interstate Facility
- **Other Factors:** Hurricane Evacuation Route; Prominent Report Addresses the Need for Improvement; or the Corridor is part of a National, Economic, or Military Highway System

What Can You Do
- Communicate Importance of Good Access Management and Land Use Coordination
- Protect Corridors to Maintain High Quality of Service
- Consider Strategic Corridors in Planning Process (Local Transportation Plans)
- Promote Land Use Planning that Supports the Strategic Corridors Concept

Strategic Corridors in a Nutshell:
"A set of Existing Highways Vital to Moving People and Goods within and just outside North Carolina"

Contact: David Wasserman
NCDOT Statewide Planning Branch
1554 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1554
(919) 715-5482 ext 380
dswasserman@dot.state.nc.us

SUMMARY SHEET

SELECTION CRITERIA for STRATEGIC HIGHWAY CORRIDORS

Criteria	Statewide Strategic Corridors	Regional Strategic Corridors
Mobility	Facilities of Statewide Interest High Traffic Volumes; High Truck % Serves Long-Distance Travel	Facilities of Regional Significance Serves Regional Destinations & Commuter Traffic
Connectivity	Connects an Existing **Major Activity Center** to another **Major Activity Center**, Seaport, Major Airport, or Major Military Base	Connects an Existing **Major** or **Regional Activity Center** to another **Major** or **Regional Activity Center**, Seaport, Major Airport, or Major Military Base
Interstate Connectivity	Connects an Existing Interstate facility to another Existing or Planned Interstate facility	Connects an Existing Interstate facility to another Existing or Planned Interstate facility
Interstate Reliever	Currently Serves or has Potential to Serve as a Reliever Route to an Existing Interstate Facility	Currently Serves or has Potential to Serve as a Reliever Route to an Existing Interstate Facility

Definitions
- Major Activity Center: Urban Area (City) having a Population of 50,000 or more
- Regional Activity Center: Urban Area having a Population between 20,000 and 50,000

Other Factors
- Corridor is designated as a Hurricane Evacuation Route
- Corridor is cited in a Prominent NC Report
- Corridor is part of a National, Congressional, Statewide, Economic, or Military Highway System

What was the Format of the Forums?

Each forum was 2½ hours. Eight of the nine forums were held during the morning hours. Agenda included:

1. **Welcome and Overview.** (15 minutes) AH HA! began the meeting by welcoming participants and explaining that they were an independent consulting company who was invited by NCDOT to facilitate the forum. NCDOT staff then introduced the overall Strategic Highway Corridors concept and reviewed the three objectives for the meeting. AH HA! then reviewed the agenda and ground rules for the session and invited participants to introduce themselves.

   Comments. The Welcome and Overview was designed to strike a friendly tone of "we are all here to have a conversation - but one that is structured." There was a wall-sized meeting agenda, including outcomes, roles and rules. The roles stated that AH HA! was to facilitate; NCDOT staff was to share information and respond to questions; and participants were to participate. The rules were to listen, be open and honest, actively participate and build on each other's ideas.

2. **The Ideal Highway System.** (20 minutes) Participants introduced themselves to each other at their tables and shared their perspectives about what elements or components make up 'The Ideal Highway System'. After each table had an opportunity for discussion, AH HA! asked the full group to share their perspectives on this topic. AH HA! captured these on a wall-sized 'Circle Around' graphic template.

   Comments. This exercise gave participants the opportunity to articulate what's important to them when it comes to the highway system. It brought out their needs and concerns and engaged them in the discussion and set the stage for NCDOT staff to explain how the Strategic Highway Corridors concept fit into the context of an ideal highway system. It also allowed participants who had specific frustrations toward NCDOT or transportation projects to express those and see that they were captured on the wall template, allowing them to move forward.

3. **About Strategic Highway Corridors.** (45 minutes)
   Part I - NCDOT Presentation. NCDOT explained the overall purpose and goals of the Strategic Highway Corridors concept using a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation focused on why the concept is important and how they might help to address some of the wishes and concerns that were expressed by the group in the previous activity. The presentation also included examples of corridors, what they look like, and an overview of the selection criteria.

   Comments. This segment helped move the participants from understanding the common elements that make up an ideal highway system to understanding a key NCDOT strategy to meet this goal – the Strategic Highway Corridors concept.

   Part II - Facilitated Discussion. After the presentation participants were asked to write their responses to the presentation and place them on their tabletop template using these four frameworks:

- Benefits: "What I like…", " What this will do for me/us…"
- Challenges: Doubts, Concerns, Critical Issues
- Big Ideas: Ideas to build on the benefits or overcome the challenges
- Questions: Questions about the Strategic Highway Corridors concept or implementation plan

Each table then discussed their responses and common themes for each focus area were placed on the wall-sized template. This served as a starting point for the full group conversation with NCDOT staff. NCDOT staff frequently asked for clarification as questions and comments were shared in order to address the specific issue and avoid misinterpretation.

Comments. This segment of the forums helped participants to internalize and react to the goals and strategies of the corridors concept and helped NCDOT to continue to identify common themes and critical issues.

4. **Selection Criteria.** (30 minutes) NCDOT staff then presented the selection criteria and maps for the proposed Strategic Highway Corridors through PowerPoint. After the presentation large foam-board maps highlighting the Strategic Highway Corridors were displayed. Participants were then asked to give their reactions as follows:

   - "What works is…"
   - "What doesn't work…"
   - "Questions…"

   Participants wrote their reactions on sticky notes and placed them directly on the NCDOT maps. As participants stood by the maps, one person from each group shared the responses with the full group.

   Comments. The process of placing sticky notes directly on the maps gave participants a direct connection and helped to build additional buy-in for the public involvement process.

5. **Wrap Up.** (10 minutes) As a wrap-up to the formal portion of the session, NCDOT staff reviewed the key points about the Strategic Highway Corridors concept and explained how they will work with the information from all the forums to develop recommendations to the Board of Transportation. NCDOT staff also gave several ideas on what participants could do as a follow up to the meeting.

   Comments. NCDOT placed an emphasis on how the Department is going to work together with stakeholders and partner with them as they move forward.

6. **Open Discussion (including Regional Planning Initiatives).** (30 minutes) After the formal program ended, participants were invited to stay and ask specific questions or share ideas with NCDOT staff.

Comments. In the three Eastern Region meetings, BOT member Cam McRae led a discussion on an Eastern North Carolina Regional Transportation Plan. Note: This Plan became integrated with the Strategic Highway Corridors Vision Plan.

Team Debrief. After each forum, NCDOT staff held a post session debrief in order to capture feedback, common themes, and critical issues from each meeting. This post-session analysis was compiled and sent to all Forum participants on February 19, 2004. These comments can be found on the following pages.

What Activity occurred Following the Forums?

Following the public forums, AH HA! led the NCDOT team through a one-day knowledge sharing and action planning session. This session was designed to build team alignment around knowledge gained from the public involvement sessions and make decisions about implications for the state planning process. The AH HA! team assisted NCDOT staff in developing a format to share their findings and helped outline a series of action items to advance the concept and report the overall effort within the NCDOT organization and to other partner agencies.