
8.0 COMMENTS AND COORDINATION

A Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that addresses the full range of alternatives and issues important to the selection of a preferred alternative can be accomplished only in consultation with those who have a stake in that decision. This chapter describes the scoping process, agency coordination process, and public involvement activities, as well as the key issues and pertinent information received through these efforts.

8.1 Earlier EA and FONSI Preparation

The US 321 improvements study began in late 1989 as the study of a widening project. The desire for a Blowing Rock bypass was first expressed at the first Citizens Informational Workshop on January 25, 1990 and again at a second workshop on June 21, 1990. Participants suggested numerous locations for a bypass.

In February 1991, a scoping letter was distributed to regulatory agencies requesting comments on several Blowing Rock bypass alternatives. The corridors discussed were based, in part, on citizen suggestions.

In 1993, an Environmental Assessment (EA) (NCDOT, August 1993) was prepared that recommended widening US 321 from NC 268 in Patterson to US 221 in Blowing Rock. It listed a widening project as the preferred alternative and concluded that a bypass around Blowing Rock was not reasonable.

Following a September 1, 1993 public hearing, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was released in September 1994 for a widening project between NC 268 and Blackberry Road. Based on hearing and agency comments, the FONSI stated that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be prepared for US 321 improvements from Blackberry Road to US 221 in Blowing Rock and would include consideration of a Blowing Rock bypass.

Work on the EIS began in 1995 with a new study of potential bypass alternatives. The following sections describe public and agency involvement during project scoping, study of potential bypass alternatives, and preparation of the DEIS. Other general outreach programs also are described.

8.2 DEIS Scoping

Scoping is designed to encourage early participation of the public, elected officials, and interested governmental agencies in the decision-making process. The scoping process is intended to be a collaborative and cooperative process considering views from parties who will be affected by or who have an interest in the proposed project. Initially, the scoping process provided a mechanism to inform the public and governmental review agencies that an EIS was being prepared for the project. Subsequent input from the public and government agencies then helped to define the project alternatives to be examined, to identify the impacts to be considered, and to establish the goals and objectives to guide the evaluation of the alternatives.

In August 1995, a scoping letter was distributed to regulatory agencies to solicit comments for the EIS study, initiate coordination for the project, and provide notice of an interagency scoping meeting, held on February 1, 1996.

8.2.1 Scoping Letter Responses

Responses to the 1995 scoping letter are included in the DEIS as Appendix A. They can be summarized as follows:

- Area public schools indicated that impacts from the proposed project were not anticipated.
- The NC Wildlife Resources Commission provided information regarding what natural resource issues they would like to see addressed in the EIS.
- The NC Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources (DEHNR) (now the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources) Divisions of Environmental Management, Land Resources, and Soil and Water Conservation also provided information regarding what natural resource issues they would like to see addressed in the EIS.
- The DEHNR Division of Environmental Management (now the Division of Water Quality) indicated that alternatives other than widening would result in significant wetland and water impacts.
- The DEHNR Division of Forestry submitted comments indicating that they were in favor of the Widening Alternative only because of the potential impacts a bypass would have on woodlands. They also indicated what information regarding woodlands they would like to see presented in the EIS.
- The NC Department of Cultural Resources (State Historic Preservation Officer) indicated that the alternatives and their areas of potential effect presented in the scoping letter were unlikely to impact archaeological resources.
- Region D Council of Governments' Transportation Advisory Committee submitted comments supporting the concept of improving US 321 to a multi-lane facility.
- The Town of Blowing Rock was opposed to widening US 321 through Blowing Rock.
- Watauga County endorsed the proposed project.
- The National Park Service indicated that they would object to any bypass that would adversely impact Blue Ridge Parkway lands or viewsheds and/or significantly alter natural, cultural, or visual resources.
- The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) indicated that they prefer widening the existing alignment rather than pursuing a bypass alternative. The USFWS also provided an updated list of federally protected endangered and threatened species known from Caldwell and Watauga counties that may occur within the area of influence of the proposed bypass.

8.2.2 February 1, 1996 Agency Scoping Meeting

A meeting was held with representatives of federal and state regulatory agencies on February 1, 1996. Agencies represented included:

- Caldwell County
- Town of Blowing Rock
- Federal Highway Administration
- NC Department of Cultural Resources (State Historic Preservation Officer)
- NC Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources
 - Division of Environmental Management
 - Wildlife Resources Commission
- NC Forest Service
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- US Fish and Wildlife Service

After discussing the progress of the project since the last Steering Committee meeting in 1991, the project's study team presented its findings related to:

- Potential bypass alternatives and their concept origin
- Traffic forecast observations
- Level of service results
- Capacity-sensitive analysis
- Accident analysis
- Median safety study

The presentation also included a discussion on observations about the bypass alternatives, the merits of crossing the Parkway in a tunnel and recommendations for the rest of the study.

8.2.3 Citizen Participation in Scoping

The public was involved in scoping in two ways, first through a citizens informational workshop held in August of 1995 and second through the initial meetings of the Citizens Advisory Committee. Both of these efforts also were a part of the project's bypass alternatives study and are described in the next section.

8.3 Bypass Alternatives Study

The project's study team conducted a bypass alternatives study (described in Chapter 2) from 1995 to 1999. Citizen involvement opportunities included two citizens informational workshops and five meetings of a Citizens Advisory Committee. In addition, an Interagency/Steering Committee meeting was held on December 17, 1996 at which an alternatives assessment questionnaire was circulated. In March 1999, the Secretary of Transportation presented a proposal for the alternatives to be evaluated in the DEIS at a meeting of the Town Council of Blowing Rock, County Commissioners for Caldwell and Watauga counties, and the Citizens Advisory Committee.

8.3.1 Citizen Involvement

Citizen involvement activities that took place as part of the bypass alternatives study included:

- Citizens informational workshops that provided an opportunity for the general public to discuss the study and its findings with members of the study team. Two citizens informational workshops were held. At both workshops, the agenda was informal. The public was invited to come at any time during a three-hour period to see the land suitability map, the potential bypass alternatives (at the second workshop), ask questions, and give comments to study team members.
- Citizens' Advisory Committee meetings. This committee was formed to allow citizens of the project area to participate in the planning process and to meet regularly with the study team. It consisted of 14 members and served as an advisory body to help the NCDOT develop a project that offers a reasonable balance of the diverse issues associated with the project. The committee consists of representatives from the following government or civic organizations: Blowing Rock Town Council; Watauga County Board of Commissioners; the North Carolina Alliance for Transportation Reform; the Blowing Rock Community Club; the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock; the Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce; the Blowing Rock Merchants Association; the Blowing Rock Historical Society; the Concerned Citizens of Blackberry Valley/Bailey Camp (added in March 1996); the Aho community; the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners; Appalachian State University; and the Blowing Rock Neighborhood Coalition (added in August 1996).

Other general citizen outreach programs are described in Section 8.5 and included a newsletters, a toll-free project information line, and a website. The Citizens Advisory Committee meetings and the citizens informational workshop meetings are described in chronological order in the sections that follow.

July 12, 1995 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting

The purpose of this meeting was to review the role of the Citizens' Advisory Committee, to elect a committee chairperson, and to describe the project's history, its current status and the scope of work for the EIS. The group also discussed the types of issues to be addressed when comparing bypass alternatives. Specific concerns raised by committee members included:

- The environmental and community impacts associated with a bypass would be greater than those associated with the widening;
- Countywide impacts, rather than only impacts to Blowing Rock, need to be assessed;
- Safety should be the overriding factor when choosing a bypass or widening alternative;
- Widening the road would have adverse impacts on the Green Park Historic District; and
- A bypass will be necessary even if the existing road is widened.

The committee also requested that a copy of accident records for the area be sent to members.

August 29, 1995 Citizens Informational Workshop

The August 29, 1995 Citizens Informational Workshop was held in Blowing Rock to present a land suitability map showing community, cultural, and natural features in the project area and to solicit comments on the study, alternatives, and potential environmental impact issues. The

desire for an alternative that crossed the Blue Ridge Parkway, including a tunnel crossing, was expressed.

At this meeting, 194 persons registered their presence. Key issues raised at the workshop related to support for a Blowing Rock bypass, support for widening US 321, the development of alternatives, and the land suitability map.

Supporters of a Blowing Rock bypass said they believed that widening US 321 would:

- Spoil the character of Blowing Rock;
- Adversely affect the historic district;
- Close businesses along US 321 during construction;
- Encourage unsafe speeds and cause more accidents;
- Cause structural damage during blasting;
- Jeopardize the safety of students who cross US 321 walking to and from school;
- Increase truck traffic in Blowing Rock;
- Increase crime in Blowing Rock; and
- Become obsolete in a few years, necessitating a bypass anyway.

Supporters of widening US 321 said they believed that a Blowing Rock bypass would:

- Displace more people than the widening alternative;
- Adversely affect the area's natural beauty;
- Adversely affect the natural environment;
- Cost much more than the widening;
- Increase noise levels;
- Spoil views, thereby reducing property values; and
- Spoil views and serenity from Parkway overlooks.

November 11, 1995 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting

A second Citizens Advisory Committee meeting was held on November 11, 1995 to review workshop and agency scoping comments, the land suitability map, and potential bypass alternatives.

The committee reviewed comments from the workshop and from agency scoping letters. Another topic was how to avoid sensitive features when selecting a bypass alternative. The majority of the time was spent on basic design concepts, potential location corridors, and typical section alternatives for the potential bypass alternatives. Specific questions and concerns expressed by committee members included:

- What is the National Park Service's reaction to a Parkway crossing?
- Will the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) be involved in the study?
- Why was a 1993 estimate of displacements associated with the widening different from a 1991 estimate?
- Should the taxpayers of Blowing Rock expect a tax increase to fund the relocation of utilities?

Several questions were asked about grades on the bypass and the cost of certain features like truck escape ramps. One member also asked that the study team explore a tunnel option in more detail. The committee expressed an interest in seeing the alternatives on a topographic map.

March 27, 1996 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting

A third Citizens Advisory Committee meeting was held on March 27, 1996 to review traffic, level of service, and design criteria for the potential bypass corridors. The feasibility of a Parkway crossing from the perspective of the amount of traffic that would be attracted from existing US 321 was also discussed.

Functional designs for ten bypass alternatives were prepared. The alignments submitted by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock representative were refined to form four corridors. A fifth corridor was a refined version of the bypass alternative presented as the "most reasonable" bypass alternative in the 1994 Environmental Assessment. Five additional corridors were developed by the study team and reflected alternative ways for passing through the Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds. The refinements to the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock's alternatives allowed them to more closely follow the existing terrain, reducing the amount of potential excavation and cost.

The focus of this meeting was traffic and accident studies. Study team members presented traffic forecasts and level of service and accident analyses for existing US 321 and for the potential bypass alternatives. The committee and study team also discussed the engineering trade-offs associated with the bypass alternatives that had been developed at that point and had questions regarding:

- The traffic model. Many questioned the accuracy of the model as well as the accuracy of the data put into the model.
- The 30th highest hourly volume and why road improvements are often designed to serve these volumes at an adequate level of service.
- The accident analysis. The committee wanted to know if it accounted for the higher speed of a four-lane road. Another member asked why there were more total accidents with the bypass than with the widening alternative. Comments were made regarding the severity of accidents.
- Whether or not truckers would remain on the existing route to avoid the grades on the bypass.
- The alternatives. Some committee members were concerned about community impacts in the Possum Hollow Road area, while others were concerned about the environmental and community impacts in the Blackberry Valley/Bailey Camp area. A majority of the questions and comments, however, were engineering-related (grades, bridges, costs, etc.).

July 31, 1996 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting

A fourth Citizens Advisory Committee meeting was held on July 31, 1996. The purpose of this meeting was to present the ten initial potential bypass alternatives to the committee and to explain the criteria used to identify them. Similarities and small differences among the alternatives also were presented to the committee. Committee members were asked to identify the factors they considered most important in selecting bypass alternatives and to choose the alternatives, of the ten presented, that should be evaluated in the DEIS and compared to the widening alternative.

The factors selected as most important by committee members, in order, were community impact, safety, efficiency of traffic movement, and cost. The majority of the members stated that none of the alternatives were acceptable either because they preferred the widening alternative or because they favored an alternative that completely bypassed Blowing Rock or crossed the Blue Ridge Parkway. The NCDOT reaffirmed its decision not to pursue bypass alternatives that cross the Blue Ridge Parkway. Specific comments by committee members included:

- Each of the alignments is fatally flawed. It was stated that refinements to the alignments submitted by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock had rendered them unacceptable because of steeper grades and greater community impacts.
- The NCDOT has not made a good faith effort to comply with Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 in its identification of bypass alternatives.
- None of the alignments meets the criteria for a safe highway. The study team assumed this comment referred to the grades of the potential bypass alternatives.
- What are the Blue Ridge Parkway restrictions?
- The corridors do not bypass Blowing Rock enough. Some committee members wanted an alignment that completely avoids the town limits of Blowing Rock.
- The information presented shows conclusively that a bypass is not a feasible alternative and that widening the existing road is the only practical solution. This view was shared by a few of the committee members who believed that engineering and environmental findings demonstrated that a bypass would not be feasible in this area.
- Although the widening alternative is preferred, Alternative E (now Bypass Alternative 1A) is the best of the alignments being examined. This view was expressed by a committee member who, although he preferred the widening alternative, was able to select the alignment he thought should be in the EIS for comparison to the widening alternative.

August 1, 1996 Citizens Informational Workshop

The second Citizens Informational Workshop was held in order to present the potential bypass alternatives and their possible traffic, social, natural resource, and visual impacts. At this meeting, 239 persons registered their presence. Information was organized into five sets of displays, each staffed by a study team member(s) with expertise in that particular topic. The topics included:

- Criteria for identifying potential bypass alternatives;
- Engineering findings;
- Community and cultural resource findings;
- Natural resource findings; and
- Next steps.

Opposition to the potential bypass alternatives proposed by the study team was universal. Those who identified themselves as living in Caldwell County and in the rural areas in Watauga County generally supported the widening alternative. Most others indicated that crossing the

Blue Ridge Parkway and building a bypass that is completely out of Blowing Rock was the only reasonable option.

At the urging of the Blowing Rock Town Council, the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock, and citizen comment, the study team decided after the July 31, 1996 Citizens Advisory Committee meeting and the second Citizens Informational Workshop on August 1, 1996 to examine several new alternatives proposed by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock, including a tunnel under the Blue Ridge Parkway. The Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock provided maps showing its preferred bypass locations and design parameters. The study team met with representatives of this group prior to completing its designs to affirm that the designs met the group's expectations. The only expectation not met was tunnel length. The Citizens' Advisory Committee was given the opportunity to respond to a questionnaire that asked for comments on which bypass alternatives should be carried forward for detailed evaluation in the DEIS. Questionnaire results are discussed below in section 8.3.3.

June 24, 1997 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting

At this meeting, the fifth such meeting, the NCDOT presented four bypass alternatives that would be evaluated in detail and compared to the Widening Alternative in the DEIS. The new N.C. Board of Transportation member for Division 11 was present and offered comments. A representative of the FHWA regional office in Atlanta also attended to discuss Section 4(f) requirements. Committee members continued to express concern over community impact, particularly with the non-tunnel bypass alternatives. Questions and comments included:

- What was the anticipated schedule for completion of the DEIS;
- Cost should not be a factor in building a good highway;
- There is considerable concern that, if existing US 321 is widened, traffic will be diverted through downtown, which would be detrimental to businesses and the downtown character;
- Residents of Green Hill and along Green Hill Road do not support a bypass near or through that area;
- The reliability of the cost estimates; and
- Why were alternatives selected that closely paralleled the Blue Ridge Parkway (later dropped in early 1999) when, according to the questionnaire responses, only one person supported the concept.

The Blowing Town Council passed a resolution on October 20, 1997 saying that all five alternatives were "unacceptable in addressing the Town's transportation needs." They suggested no additional alternatives.

8.3.2 December 17, 1996 Interagency/Steering Committee Meeting

A second interagency/steering committee meeting was held on December 17, 1996. Agencies and organizations represented included:

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- Town of Blowing Rock
 - Watauga County
 - Region D Council of Governments
 - Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock
 - Blowing Rock Historical Society
 - NC Alliance for Transportation Reform
 - Appalachian State University
 - US Fish and Wildlife Service
 - Federal Highway Administration
 - Blue Ridge Parkway
 - NC Department of Cultural Resources (State Historic Preservation Officer)
 - NC Division of Water Quality
 - NC Wildlife Resources Commission

The primary purpose of this meeting was to present the additional citizen alternatives developed during the Citizens Advisory Committee meetings and a preliminary evaluation for all of the alternatives. After the meeting, a questionnaire was prepared to aid regulatory agency and local government representatives in identifying the bypass alternatives they thought should be evaluated in detail in the DEIS.

8.3.3 Alternatives Assessment Questionnaire

At the second interagency meeting, the original alternatives and the additional alternatives proposed by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock were presented along with an assessment of each. A request was made that the assessment be restructured and mailed to members of the Interagency/Steering Committee Meeting. In response, a questionnaire was developed that presented the advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives and asked for preferences. Copies were sent to members of the Citizens Advisory Committee and representatives of various cultural and natural resource agencies. In the questionnaire, the potential bypass alternatives were divided into two geographic areas: south end alternatives and north end alternatives (see Chapter 2). In each geographic area, advantages and disadvantages were described for each alternative. For each question, respondents were asked to answer “yes” or “no”, and give their reasons

Of the questionnaires distributed, 18 responses were received, ten from the Citizens’ Advisory Committee and eight from regulatory agencies. In general, the members of the Citizens’ Advisory Committee were opposed to the longer bypass alternatives extending south of Blackberry Road and to a northern terminus at Possum Hollow Road. Three of the Citizens’ Advisory Committee respondents were not in favor of a bypass at all. Of those who responded, the most support was for an alternative that started just north of Blackberry Road and passed under the Blue Ridge Parkway in a tunnel. There was no agency support for such an alternative, that started south of the Blackberry Road or ended in a tunnel (although one respondent suggested that a tunnel be studied since it was the preferred alternative of the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock and the Blowing Rock Town Council.) Two of the agency respondents did not favor a bypass at all. Of those who selected alternatives to be studied further, most preferred those that followed a corridor that started just south of the Blowing Rock town limits and passed through the eastern part of Blowing Rock.

Responses to the questionnaires were used to help the study team select, in the fall of 1997, four Bypass Alternatives for comparison with the Widening Alternative in the DEIS. They were designated as Bypass Alternatives 1, 2, 3, and 4 and are described in Chapter 2.

8.3.4 March 8, 1999 Video Presentation

A video presentation was prepared and presented on March 8, 1999 to various local officials and the Citizens Advisory Committee members. Members of the general public also attended.

The video described the setting and history of the US 321 project and focused on the following topics:

- The results of NCDOT's 1998 origin and destination and geotechnical studies and
- The NCDOT's concerns about the four Bypass Alternatives selected in 1997, particularly taking into account the findings of the geotechnical studies;

The NCDOT suggested that all of the Bypass Alternatives be dropped from further consideration in favor of a widening alternative that included landscaping, underground utilities and other amenities. The NCDOT asked for comments on the presentation to be received by May 10, 1999. Nearly 200 comments were received. About half of the respondents favored the Widening Alternative as presented with landscaping and other amenities, while the other half favored Bypass Alternative 4.

After this meeting the NCDOT decided to evaluate the Widening Alternative, Bypass Alternative 1, and Bypass Alternative 4 in detail in the DEIS.

8.4 DEIS Preparation

During preparation of the DEIS, three NEPA/Section 404 team meetings were held. Additional meetings were held with cultural resource agencies and meetings with representatives of citizens groups.

8.4.1 NEPA/Section 404 Merger Team Meetings

NEPA/Section 404 merger meetings are held under an agreement between the NCDOT, the FHWA, and the USACOE. These meetings are a formal means to involve early in the project development process the state and federal regulatory agencies that have an interest in the issuance of USACOE dredge and fill permits for wetland and stream impacts under the terms of Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) also participates in these meetings.

The USACOE must also meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in order to issue a dredge and fill permit. These meetings provide an opportunity for the participants to formally concur with key decisions in the NCDOT and FHWA's EIS preparation process so that they do not need to be revisited during any application for a USACOE permit. There are three concurrence points. Two occur prior to the release of the DEIS and the third after the DEIS public and agency review process. The concurrence points are:

1. Concurrence on purpose and need;
2. Concurrence on the alternatives to be evaluated in the DEIS;
3. Concurrence on the preferred alternative.

The sections that follow describe three meetings that led to concurrence at the first two points. This merger team process was established by a Memorandum of Agreement in 1999 after the

Widening Alternative, Bypass Alternative 1, and Bypass Alternative 4 were selected by the NCDOT earlier in the year. Therefore, concurrence occurred later than the NCDOT's March 1999 decision to evaluate three alternatives in the DEIS.

November 4, 1999 Meeting

The first NEPA/404 merger team meeting was held on November 4, 1999. Representatives from the following groups and agencies were in attendance:

- Blue Ridge Parkway;
- Federal Highway Administration;
- North Carolina Department of Transportation;
- North Carolina Division of Water Quality;
- North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office;
- US Army Corps of Engineers;
- US Environmental Protection Agency; and
- North Carolina State University.

The objective of this meeting was to reach agreement on both the purpose and need statement and the alternatives to be evaluated in detail in the DEIS.

Participants agreed that transportation improvements are necessary along this section of US 321. Prior to reaching concurrence on the alternatives, the representative of the Division of Water Quality requested that a functional assessment of streams and wetlands for each of five alternatives (widening and all four 1997 bypass alternatives: 1, 2, 3, and 4) be provided. A decision on concurrence was postponed until the water resource information could be sent to the merger team members; the information was sent in February 2000.

December 14, 2000 Meeting

On December 14, 2000 a second merger meeting was held. Representatives from the following groups and agencies were in attendance:

- Blue Ridge Parkway;
- Federal Highway Administration;
- North Carolina Department of Transportation;
- North Carolina Division of Water Quality;
- North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office;
- US Army Corps of Engineers;
- US Environmental Protection Agency (via telephone);
- US Fish and Wild Service; and
- North Carolina Wildlife Resources.

Again, the purpose of the meeting was to obtain agreement on purpose and need and alternatives to be evaluated in the DEIS. During the meeting, the study team again reviewed the project's Statement of Purpose and Need (Chapter 1 of the DEIS) with the team. The merger team participants signed an agreement concurring with the Statement of Purpose and Need (See Appendix B).

The study team also reviewed the characteristics of the three alternatives selected for evaluation in 1999, as well as the two selected in 1997 and dropped from further consideration in 1999. Several members of the merger team expressed the concern that their concurrence with the bypass alternatives would be an indication that they believed the alternatives were reasonable and feasible. Concurrence on the alternatives was not achieved.

January 18, 2001 Meeting

A third NEPA/404 Merger Team meeting was held on January 18, 2001. The same groups and agencies at the December Merger Team meeting were present with the exception of the Blue Ridge Parkway and North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. The purpose of the meeting was to reach consensus on alternatives to be evaluated in the DEIS. The majority of the Merger Team members indicated that they would not concur with Bypass Alternative 4. The NCDOT emphasized that this corridor was preferred by many citizens and that it was critical that it be evaluated in full in the DEIS. Consequently, the Merger Team signed a concurrence form that listed only the Widening Alternative and Bypass Alternative 1 as alternatives to be included in the DEIS. The language for the signed concurrence agreement indicated concurrence only on the Widening Alternative and Bypass Alternative 1. It was understood by the merger team, however, that the NCDOT would evaluate Bypass Alternative 4 in full in the DEIS. The NCDOT secured the signatures of merger team members not in attendance.

8.4.2 Cultural Resource Agency Meetings

In addition to participating in the interagency scoping and the NEPA/404 Merger Team meetings, representatives of the SHPO and the National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway) participated in additional meetings specific to cultural resource issues.

On February 27, 2000, a meeting was conducted with the SHPO. Comments from the SHPO included:

- The SHPO is opposed to the widening of US 321 through the Green Park Historic District in Blowing Rock.
- Widening US 321 would increase noise and create a visual impact on the historic district. The construction process would impact the Green Park Inn through noise and disruption.
- There is a need for improvements to the current roadway and traffic situation. Building Bypass Alternative 4 would provide a four-lane bypass that would not negatively impact the Green Park Historic District.

On February 28, 2000, a meeting was held with representatives of the National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway). The following items were discussed during the meeting:

- The Blue Ridge Parkway is eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The Blue Ridge Parkway is a cultural resource.
- The National Park Service has performed an in-depth scenic resource analysis for the Blue Ridge Parkway, including viewshed assessments.
- Viewshed impacts must be evaluated beyond the right-of-way.

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- The view from the Thunderhill overlook is of primary importance to the National Park Service. The DEIS needs to perform a viewshed analysis for each design alternative in a comparative fashion.
 - Although the Linn Cove Viaduct (along the Blue Ridge Parkway near Grandfather Mountain) is very sensitive to the natural environment and considered a fine design, a Bypass Alternative 4 using a roadway structure would have to be evaluated on its particular merits and fit into the rugged Alternative 4 alignment landscape.

A field reconnaissance was conducted on August 22 and 23, 2000 with representatives of the FHWA, the SHPO, the NCDOT, the National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway), and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The purpose of the field reconnaissance was to view and to discuss draft preliminary design plans and impact issues. The National Park Service also presented participants with its position paper, *Applicability of Section 4(f) – Constructive Use for the US 321 Bypass Project* (August 2000) and discussed it with participants.

8.4.3 Citizens Advisory Committee

In October 2000, members of the study team conducted informational meetings with representatives of most of the groups that are represented on the Citizens Advisory Committee. The meetings provided a project update and an opportunity for participants to ask questions regarding the project and its status. A representative of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation attended some of the meetings.

8.5 General Outreach Programs

In addition to the activities already described, the NCDOT has had several other programs to keep the public informed about the project and its status. These include newsletters, a toll-free project hotline, a web site, and small group meetings. The NCDOT maintains a mailing list of people who own property along the corridor and of other stakeholders interested in the US 321 project.

8.5.1 Newsletters

Between the summer of 1995 and the spring of 2001, the NCDOT issued six newsletters. The mailing list used to distribute the newsletters contains approximately 650 individuals and includes all property owners within 500 feet (152 meters) of the centerline of each of the proposed alternatives. These periodic newsletters are available on the US 321 website (see Section 8.5.4) and now provide an historical perspective on the development of the DEIS. Each of the issues provided contact information for people who had questions or comments on the proposed project or associated studies. In addition to being mailed to individuals and organizations on the project mailing list, the newsletters were also distributed at the Citizen Informational Workshops. Newsletters are included in Appendix D.

Summer 1995

The first newsletter was issued in August 1995. It provided information about the initiation of the EIS study and how it related to the EA released in 1993. The newsletter announced the August 1995 Citizens Informational Workshop and provided information on members of the Citizens Advisory Committee. It described what would take place during the alternatives analysis, part of

the EIS study, and the social, economic, and environmental issues that would be examined during the later assessment of impacts. The newsletter also outlined the public involvement program.

Summer 1996

The second newsletter was issued prior to the Citizens Informational Workshop in August 1996. It presented the key findings of the bypass alternatives study, which was an evaluation of 10 potential bypass alternatives. The newsletter explained the criteria used in the selection of alternatives, traffic and engineering findings, and the potential for community, cultural resource, visual, and natural resource impacts. It also gave an update on the activities of the Citizens Advisory Committee. In addition to being mailed to individuals and organizations on the project mailing list, it was also distributed at the second workshop.

Fall 1997

The third newsletter identified the four Bypass Alternatives that were initially selected for detailed evaluation and comparison to the Widening Alternative in the DEIS. This issue also provided maps of the alternatives selected for evaluation.

Fall 1999

The Fall 1999 newsletter described the refinement of alternatives selection and detailed the three remaining alternatives to be evaluated in the DEIS. Maps of the alternatives and photo simulations of the Widening Alternative were included in the newsletter.

Fall 2000

The fifth newsletter provided an update on the status of the DEIS preparation and answered frequently asked questions. This issue also gave information on the US 321 study team members and their recent activities.

Spring 2001

This newsletter also provided an update on the DEIS activities, including fieldwork that had taken place since the last newsletter. It provided information on the change of status of what was an historic property affected by Bypass Alternatives 4A and 4B. It also invited parties with an interest in the historic resources in the project area to consult on historic properties. A description of the alternatives and detailed maps were also included in the newsletter.

Summer 2001

This newsletter provided more information on the roles and responsibilities of a “consulting party” for historic resource impact assessment and mitigation. It renewed the invitation for people and groups to apply to be a consulting party.

Spring 2002

This newsletter is being released with the DEIS. It announces the availability of the DEIS for review, public hearing dates and times, and the due date for all comments.

8.5.2 Small Group Meetings

Each of the newsletters invited community groups and other stakeholders to arrange a small group meeting with the study team if they wanted to get additional information or provide comments on the project. Small group meetings were conducted with a variety of stakeholders, including the members of the following groups: Blowing Rock Country Club Board of Directors; Blowing Rock Historical Society; Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock; Town of Blowing Rock; Green Hill Neighborhood Association; Blowing Rock Merchants Association; Blackberry Valley Citizens Group; and Appalachian State University. Small group meetings specific to historical resources were conducted in 2000.

The landscape architect and historic resource specialist from the US 321 study team visited Blowing Rock in early 2000 and met with several small groups of citizens and stakeholders. The meetings assisted in the development of context sensitive design treatments for the widening and revegetation plans for engineering designs in the Bypass Alternatives 1 and 4 corridors. Economists doing field studies also interacted with small groups when they surveyed local merchants along existing US 321, Realtors, and merchants along Main Street to assist in evaluating economic impacts.

8.5.3 Toll Free Project Information Line

A toll free information line was established for the US 321 project. Calls received included requests to be placed on the mailing list, questions about the status of the project, and requests for information on how the alternatives might affect specific properties.

8.5.4 Website

The US 321 project website (<http://www.dot.state.nc.us/projects/blowingrock321/>) contains links to the following information:

- Copies of all of the project newsletters;
- US 321 project-related announcements;
- The March 1999 presentation;
- The 1997 *Bypass Alternatives Report*;
- The 1999 Purpose and Need Statement;
- Photo simulations of the project corridor;
- US 321 project schedule and history;
- Questions related to the project and their answers; and
- E-mail and information line contact information.

The DEIS is the most recent addition to the website, as well as information on the pending public hearing.