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I-26 CONNECTOR
ASHEVILLE
NCDOT PROJECT NO. I-2513

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NCDOT Seeks Input from Citizens on Project's Purpose and Need and Alternatives

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is conducting planning and environmental studies for the I-26 Asheville Connector from I-40 to US 19-23-70 north of Asheville in Buncombe County, North Carolina (Transportation Improvement Program [TIP] Project No. I-2513). The proposed project is intended to provide a link between existing I-26 and US 19-23-70 north of Asheville, completing a gap in the I-26 corridor within North Carolina.

The purpose of this newsletter is to provide citizens with information about the project and provide citizens with an opportunity to review and comment on the purpose of and need for the project and project alternatives. This newsletter contains a project description, an update on the project status, the project Purpose and Need statement, a summary of project alternatives being studied, next steps in the project development process, and project contact information.

Project Description

The proposed I-26 Asheville Connector project will improve the existing I-26, I-240 and US 19-23-70 corridors from south of the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange to the US 19-23-70 interchange with SR 1781 (Broadway). The proposed project is designated as project number I-2513 in the NCDOT Draft *2009-2015 Transportation Improvement Program* (TIP).

This project includes upgrading the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange, improving I-240 (including the interchanges) between the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange and the I-240 interchange with US 19-23-74A/Patton Avenue west of the French Broad River. At the I-240 interchange with US 19-23-74A/Patton Avenue a northward freeway on new location will be constructed that would cross the French Broad River and merge into existing US 19-23-70.

Project Status

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), as amended, the NCDOT is preparing a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposed project. The Draft EIS is a federally required environmental document that generally describes the purpose and need for the project, identifies project alternatives, and evaluates project alternatives for potential environmental effects. As part of the NEPA process, the NCDOT is providing citizens this opportunity to review and comment on the project's Purpose and Need statement and alternatives.

The alternatives to be evaluated in detail in the Draft EIS were presented at the Citizens' Informational Workshop held on October 9 & 10, 2006. Since the workshop one of the alternatives in Section B, Alternative 5, was eliminated from further consideration because of traffic operational deficiencies that could not be overcome. The alternatives remaining in Section B include Alternatives 2, 3 and 4. All of the project alternatives to be studied in detail in the Draft EIS are described later in this newsletter.

The City of Asheville and Buncombe County have recently retained an engineering consulting firm to study another conceptual alignment for crossing the French Broad River. This concept is in the early stages of development. The NCDOT will review this concept when it is completed and presented to the Department.

Purpose and Need

The following statement of purpose and need for the proposed project is presented for citizens' review and comment. Please submit any questions or comments that you may have on the purpose and need statement to Mr. Vince Rhea, NCDOT Project Engineer, no later than January 15, 2008. Mr. Rhea's contact information is included on the back page of this newsletter.

Summary of Need

System Linkage:

A better transportation facility is needed to connect I-26 south of Asheville with US 19-23 north of Asheville. I-26 currently connects the Port of Charleston, South Carolina with the mountains of North Carolina joining I-240 at the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange southwest of Asheville. I-240 west of Asheville currently connects I-26 with US 19-23-70. The I-240 freeway, constructed in the 1960's, does not meet current interstate design standards. The existing interchange connecting US 19-23-70 from the north with I-240 contains sharply-curved, single-lane ramps. Freeway traffic using this interchange connecting I-240 with the US 19-23 freeway is restricted to one lane in each direction which causes traffic to queue onto I-240. When the construction of NCDOT TIP Project A-10 (US 19-23 Improvements from Asheville to the Tennessee state line) is completed, it will allow motorists to travel on a fully controlled-access, median-divided freeway from I-81 near Kingsport, Tennessee to I-240 in Asheville.

Capacity:

I-240 needs additional capacity because increasing traffic volumes have substantially reduced the level of service on I-240 west of Asheville. Several sections of I-240 currently operate at capacity, resulting in traffic delays and queuing on I-240. Traffic congestion and resulting delays will continue to worsen in the future as the traffic volumes increase due to population increases. The completion of portions of NCDOT TIP Project A-10 has further increased traffic demands along I-240 west of Asheville. The increase in traffic volumes further contribute to the congestion and delays being experienced along I-240.

Roadway Deficiencies:

Interstates within the study area have roadway deficiencies and need to be upgraded to meet current design standards. Existing I-240 west of Asheville and the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange do not meet current interstate design standards due to substandard roadway features.

Safety:

I-240 needs safety improvements. Multiple segments of I-240, west of Asheville, currently have an accident rate for similar North Carolina facilities, demonstrating the need for safety improvements along this section of the facility.

Purpose of the Action

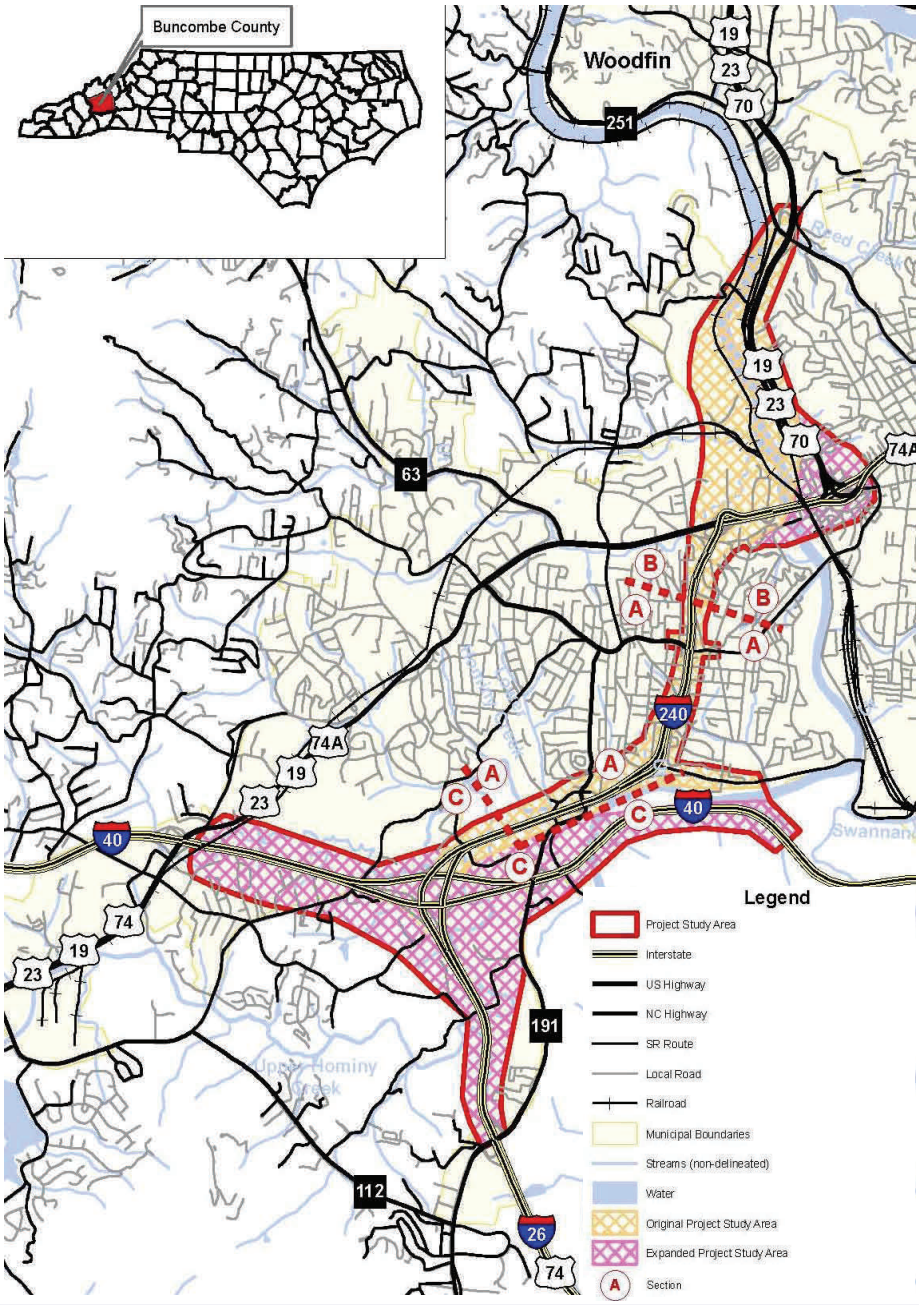
The primary purposes of the proposed project are:

- To provide a freeway-to-freeway connection between I-26 south of Asheville and US 19-23 north of Asheville.
- To provide a link in the transportation system connecting a direct, multi-lane, freeway facility meeting interstate standards from the Port of Charleston, South Carolina to I-81 near Kingsport, Tennessee.
- To improve the capacity of existing I-240 west of Asheville to accommodate the existing and forecasted (2030 design year) traffic in this growing area.
- To reduce traffic delays and congestion along the I-240 crossing of the French Broad River, which currently operates at capacity.
- To increase the remaining useful service of the existing Smoky Park Bridges by substantially reducing the volume of traffic on this vital crossing of the French Broad River.
- To improve the safety of I-240 west of Asheville.

Project Alternatives

The project is divided into three sections; A, B and C. Section A includes the I-240 portion of the project and Section B includes the I-240/Patton Avenue interchange and extends across the French Broad River to the US 19-23-70/Broadway interchange. Section C includes the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange. As indicated on the figure below, Sections A and B encompass the original project study area and Section C was added to the project later as the project study area was expanded to include the interchange.

Four detailed study alternatives including various interchange configurations were developed for Section C. Those alternatives are A-2, C-1, D-1 and F-1. Section A includes the I-240 Widening Alternative which would include a best-fit design for the widening and reconstruction of existing I-240 from a four-lane freeway to an eight-lane freeway. Three new location alternatives in Section B, Alternatives 2, 3, and 4, have been developed for detailed study. Each of the project alternatives can be viewed on the project website (http://www.ncdot.org/projects/I26Connector/) or at the NCDOT Division 13 Office in Asheville.



Next Steps in Process ...

The Draft EIS should be completed by Spring 2008 and will be available for review and comment. After the Draft EIS is signed, a public hearing will be held where citizens will be able to review project information and comment on the Draft EIS. After citizen comments have been received, the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative (LEDPA), or Preferred Alternative, will be identified from the alternatives studied and presented to the public. After identification of the Preferred Alternative, the Final EIS will be prepared. The final approval of the Preferred Alternative will be documented by the Federal Highway Administration in the Record of Decision.

PROJECT CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information about the project, please contact Mr. Vince Rhea at the address below. All comments on the Purpose and Need Statement should be submitted in writing by January 15, 2008. All questions and comments will be addressed as soon as possible.

Mr. Vince Rhea, PE
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Additional project information and maps can be found on the project website at http://www.ncdot.org/projects/I26Connector or at the NCDOT Division 13 Office located at 55 Orange Street in Asheville, NC 28802, telephone828-251-6394.

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