

In accordance with NEPA, NCDOT published a DEIS for the I-26 Connector project in October 2015. The DEIS described the purpose of and need for the project, identified project alternatives, and evaluated them for potential environmental effects. Since the DEIS was published, a preferred alternative has been chosen based on feedback from the public and environmental regulatory and resource agencies. This FEIS is presented in the same order as the DEIS, with clarification and updates such as changes in the existing environment, updated impacts anticipated from the preferred alternative, and responses to comments received on the DEIS. Some information from the DEIS is summarized, and substantive new information is noted in italics.

CHAPTER 8. AGENCY COORDINATION AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

8.1 AGENCY COORDINATION

During the study, agency coordination took place through communication with a Steering Committee and subsequently, a Merger Team, as well as through communication with federal, state, and local agencies in general. General coordination with agencies took place during the initial stages of the project when the scoping letter was issued. The Steering Committee was formed at the outset of the project. Coordination with the Merger Team took place after 2002 when the original Steering Committee became the Merger Team. Coordination with the Merger Team followed the Section 404/NEPA Merger Process and took place at specific points in the study, called Concurrence Points (CP). The timing and context of agency coordination meetings are summarized in this section.

8.1.1 HISTORY OF AGENCY COORDINATION

8.1.1.1 Issuance of Scoping Letter

At the outset of the environmental studies for the I-26 Connector, the proposed roadway was identified as TIP number I-2513. A scoping letter soliciting comments on the proposed project was sent on January 16, 1996, to the following local, state, and federal agencies:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- Tennessee Valley Authority
- United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
- United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Region IV
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- United States Geological Survey (USGS)
- Land of Sky Regional Council
- City of Asheville, Mayor
- Buncombe County, County Commissioner
- North Carolina Department of Administration State Environmental Review Clearinghouse
- North Carolina Office of Archives and History
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

- North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT)
 - Hydraulics Unit
 - Roadside Environmental Unit
 - Geotechnical Engineering Unit
 - Location and Surveys Unit
 - Right-of-way Unit
 - Traffic Engineering Branch
 - Bicycle Coordinator
 - Director of Aeronautics
 - Operations, Chief Engineer
 - Rail Planner, Rail Division
 - Division 13, Division Engineer
- North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR) (now North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality [NCDEQ]), Water Quality Lab
- North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC)

The scoping letter and agency comments received in response to the scoping letter are provided in the 2015 DEIS Appendix C (Sub-Appendix C1 and C2). The agency comments in response to the scoping letter are also summarized in the 2015 DEIS Appendix C (Sub-Appendix C1 and C2).

8.1.1.2 Section 404/NEPA Merger Process

In 1997, USACE, FHWA, and NCDOT signed an Interagency Agreement integrating Section 404 and NEPA. The agreement requires the establishment of a project team at the beginning of each transportation project and outlines the coordination process with a series of CPs, which are as follows:

- CP 1: Purpose and Need
- CP 2: Detailed Study Alternatives
- CP 2A: Bridge Locations and Lengths
- CP 3: LEDPA
- CP 4A: Avoidance and Minimization of Impacts
- CP 4B: 30 percent Hydraulic Design
- CP 4C: 100 percent Hydraulic Design and Permit Drawings

The Merger Team was formed from the original Steering Committee. The first official Merger Team meeting was held on October 23, 2002. The following agencies are part of the Merger Team:

- USACE
- USFWS
- EPA, Region IV
- NCDENR (now NCDEQ), Division of Water Resources
- NCWRC

- Tennessee Valley Authority
- North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, State Historic Preservation Office
- FBRMPO
- FHWA
- NCDOT

The Merger Team reviews and provides written concurrence at each CP before initiating the next step. The signed concurrence forms for merger meetings occurring since publication of the DEIS (CP 3 and CP 4A) are located in Appendix F.

8.1.1.3 Issuance of Notice of Intent under NEPA

In accordance with NEPA, a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a NEPA EIS was published in the Federal Register, Volume 72, No. 142, Wednesday, July 25, 2007. The NOI is included in the 2015 DEIS Appendix D.

8.1.2 AGENCY CORRESPONDENCE

Appendix C presents a chronological listing of agency correspondence since publication of the 2015 DEIS for the project.

8.1.3 AGENCY COORDINATION MEETINGS

A timeline and summary of agency coordination activities since publication of the 2015 DEIS is provided in Appendix F.

8.2 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The DEIS describes methods used for public outreach; which includes the mailing list, newsletters, post cards, the telephone hotline, the project website, and project visualizations. Copies of the newsletters and post cards are included in the 2015 DEIS Appendix C4. The project website can be found at <https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/asheville-i-26-connector>. NCDOT developed visualizations to supplement the information and maps presented at the 2015 Corridor Public Hearing in both video and map formats. The visualizations can be found on the project website.

Public meetings were conducted in several formats: citizens' information workshops, small group meetings, a public hearing, a project design forum, a project educational forum, a project informational forum, through meetings of a CCC, and small group meetings with neighborhoods.

8.2.1 COMMUNITY OUTREACH

NCDOT has held numerous meetings with community stakeholders since the project's inception. Beyond the traditional public meetings, informational workshops, public hearings, and small group meetings, NCDOT has incorporated feedback from several community

committees and/or organizations. Further coordination with the affected communities, the City of Asheville, and various stakeholders, has provided an opportunity to sufficiently avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts from and offset impacts by increased benefits to some neighborhoods. A timeline of when meetings were held, descriptions of the meeting formats, and brief summaries of meeting proceedings are summarized in this section. More detailed records of the meetings held since publication of the 2015 DEIS are provided in Appendix F.

8.2.1.1 Public Involvement Activities

A timeline and summary of public involvement activities that have occurred since publication of the DEIS is provided in Appendix F.

8.2.1.2 Neighborhood Outreach Meetings

The following is a list of neighborhood outreach meetings since publication of the DEIS including dates, locations, and approximate number of attendees:

- 09/20/2016 – *Small Group Meeting – West Asheville Business Association (WABA) at Isis Restaurant and Music Hall (743 Haywood Rd, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 40 residents.*
- 09/20/2016 – *Small Group Meeting – Montford Neighborhood/Murphy Hill Community/Houston/Courtland Community at Isaac Dickenson Elementary School (90 Montford Avenue, Asheville, NC 28801); attended by over 100 residents.*
- 10/17/2016 – *Small Group Meeting – Burton Street Neighborhood at Burton Street Community Center (134 Burton Street, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 18 residents.*
- 02/20/2017 – *Small Group Meeting – Burton Street Neighborhood at Burton Street Community Center (134 Burton Street, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 40 residents.*
- 03/21/2017 – *Small Group Meeting – Fairfax Avenue and Virginia Avenue Community at Mothlight (701 Haywood Road, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 39 residents.*
- 03/21/2017 – *Small Group Meeting – Hillcrest Apartments Community at Carl E. Johnson Community Center (100 Atkinson Street, Asheville, NC 28801); attended by approximately 12 residents.*
- 06/05/2017 – *Small Group Meeting – EWANA at the East West Vintage Rentals (278 Haywood Road, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 39 residents.*
- 06/06/2017 – *Small Group Meeting – WABA at Isis Restaurant and Music Hall (743 Haywood Road, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 40 residents.*
- 09/07/2017 – *Small Group Meeting – Fairfax Avenue and Virginia Avenue Community at Earth Fare (66 Westgate Parkway, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 15 residents.*

Based on written comments and issues and concerns discussed in the neighborhood meetings, general concerns and comments are summarized as follows:

- In general, there is mixed support for the project within these neighborhoods.
- Residents support the separation of interstate traffic from local traffic.
- There is general opposition to an eight-lane cross section.
- Residents felt that the local design plans were not adequately considered.
- Residents would like to see components of the project improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity within the project study area, especially in the area of the Westgate Shopping Center.
- Residents are anxious for the lengthy planning process to conclude and are apprehensive about how their issues and concerns will be incorporated into the planning document.
- Residents would like aesthetically pleasing sound walls, landscaped medians, and buffers as part of the project.
- There is a perception that the preferred alternative selection is biased toward costs. Residents feel that alternatives impacting working class African American neighborhoods are more affordable for the state than alternatives in other Asheville neighborhoods, therefore, skewing the selection of the preferred alternative.
- Burton Street residents remember the division of their neighborhood by the construction of I-240, and feel that Alternate 3 would have negative effects to the remaining Burton Street Community.
- *WABA members noted that closing or moving the Haywood Road interchange would likely result in loss of business to several owners surrounding the interchange and this should not be considered.*
- *There were concerns that the City of Asheville does not have an adequate amount of affordable housing for those who may be relocated by the I-26 Connector Project.*
- *Fairfax Avenue and Virginia Avenue residents expressed interest in removing the Amboy Road Extension all together in order to reduce the overall project impacts. Concepts suggested included a configuration similar to a spread diamond interchange between Brevard Road and Amboy Road. It was noted by residents, with this type of configuration, the bike lanes and sidewalk as currently proposed, could be completely eliminated by providing a greenway. They proposed the greenway connection could begin on the north side of the spread diamond interchange, and run from Shelburne Road east to Carrier Park. It was perceived by some that a greenway serving pedestrians and bicyclists would be more desirable than bike lanes/cycle tracks and a sidewalk.*
- *Residents expressed general concern over potential noise impacts.*
- *General recommendations suggested designs be prepared to provide accommodations for pedestrians and bicyclists throughout the project and with a focus on safety in areas where they interact with motor vehicles.*
- *Hillcrest Apartment Community residents agree that the proposed access changes to and from the community were generally a benefit to residents.*
- *Hillcrest Apartment Community residents agreed sidewalks to the signalized intersection at Patton Avenue would be desirable, but that attention must be paid to safety at that intersection due to the amount of traffic anticipated. The residents also agreed it would be beneficial to keep the pedestrian bridge, but that there could potentially be ramps instead of stairs to accommodate wheelchairs and any other special needs of pedestrians.*

- *WABA and EWANA residents expressed safety concerns for bicyclists and pedestrians if Haywood Road was designed as a roundabout or “ovalabout.” Many residents explained that they value being able to commute from East West Asheville to areas for recreation and work, and didn’t feel comfortable with traversing a roundabout. The perception heard from most residents was that drivers will be paying more attention to other vehicles than they would bicyclists and pedestrians.*
- *Fairfax Avenue and Virginia Avenue residents expressed positive feedback for the concepts recommended between Amboy and Brevard Roads. Community residents expressed safety concerns regarding the slip ramp from I-26 to Amboy Road south, noting cars could speed through the ramp without paying attention to bicyclists or pedestrians.*

Burton Street Community Outreach

As a result of the proposed widening in Segment A, additional right-of-way will be required in the Burton Street neighborhood. As described in Chapter 4, the Burton Street neighborhood has been classified as an Environmental Justice population that has incurred recurring impacts. NCDOT, with the assistance of a subconsultant that specializes in environmental justice issues, is investigating ways to provide additional mitigation opportunities to lessen the burden of the project on the Burton Street neighborhood. This is being addressed by the development of a community-driven Burton Street Neighborhood Plan, adopted by the City of Asheville on September 25, 2018, which includes a list of mitigation strategies to be implemented by NCDOT as part of the project. The Burton Street Neighborhood Plan is included in Appendix E.

The plan includes a list of strategies that will be implemented by NCDOT to mitigate impacts from the proposed project. As noted in the plan, included in Appendix E, the following mitigation strategies will be implemented by NCDOT:

- *Improve existing sidewalks to meet ADA design standards*
- *Improve pedestrian connections between community resources by installing a sidewalk on Downing Street per agreement of property owners*
- *Improve sidewalk connections between commercial corridors, and include a pedestrian path from Buffalo Street to Patton Avenue that will connect to future greenway*
- *Evaluate opportunities for new transit stops, such as near Burton Street and Haywood Road*
- *Install a sidewalk along Patton Avenue to connect pedestrian path and transit stop*
- *Install bus shelters and other improvements at transit stops located near Burton Street. Consider neighborhood specific designs if feasible*
- *Incorporate a Burton Street history mural on proposed I-26 Connector sound wall if built*
- *Improve Community Center infrastructure by including additional parking*
- *Construct a new park and community gathering space at Smith Mill Creek that will include an access point to the future greenway*
- *Improve the Florida Avenue and Patton Avenue intersection by adding pavement markings and left turn signals*

Increase the tree canopy within the interstate buffer along the Burton Street neighborhood where possible

A list of the outreach that has occurred with the Burton Street neighborhood during development of the Burton Street Neighborhood Plan is below. Notification materials and handouts are included in Appendix F.

- *01/15/2018 – Community Open House #1 – St Paul's Missionary Baptist Church (170 Fayetteville St, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 41 residents.*
- *01/15/2018 – Stakeholder Group Meeting – St Paul's Missionary Baptist Church (170 Fayetteville St, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 3 community business owners.*
- *03/20/2018 – Community Open House #2 – St Paul's Missionary Baptist Church (170 Fayetteville St, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 28 residents.*
- *04/30/2018 – Community Open House #3 – Burton Street Community Center (132 Burton Street, Asheville, NC 28806); attended by approximately 34 residents.*

Since publication of the Burton Street Neighborhood Plan, NCDOT initiated a working group to coordinate with the Burton Street Community on implementing the mitigation measures NCDOT has committed to. The result of this working group will be a mitigation implementation plan that can be used during the project's final design.

8.2.1.3 Corridor Public Hearing

A Pre-Hearing Open House and Corridor Public Hearing were held on November 16, 2015, in the Grand Ballroom, Renaissance Asheville Hotel. The Open House began at 4:00 PM and ended at 6:30 PM. The Corridor Public Hearing began at 7:00 PM; approximately 500 people were in attendance.

The Open House was held to give interested parties an opportunity to review displays, including design maps; ask questions directly from project staff; and leave comments, both verbal and written. The Corridor Public Hearing consisted of a formal presentation, which included an explanation of project schedule, alternatives included in the 2015 DEIS, right-of-way, relocation requirements/procedures, and the state-federal relationship.

NCDOT received approximately 1,483 comment sheets, e-mails, letters, form letters, hotline calls, verbal comments, and/or Engage NCDOT posts regarding the project. Copies of the post-hearing meeting minutes summarizing the comments received and the NCDOT responses are located in Appendix F.

The following is an overview of the public hearing and the main issues of concern regarding the project according to the comments received:

- *Agency Comments Received*
 - *Federal Agencies:*
 - *United States Environmental Protection Agency*
 - *National Marine Fisheries Service*
 - *United States Department of the Interior*

- *United States Army Corps of Engineers*
- *State Agencies*
 - *North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office*
 - *North Carolina Department of Administration State Environmental Review Clearinghouse*
 - *NCDEQ, NCWRC, NCNHP, NCDEQ Waste Management Solid Waste Section and Inactive Hazardous Sites Branch*
- *Local Agencies*
 - *City of Asheville*
 - *Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce*
 - *Town of Woodfin*
 - *Several members of the Asheville City Council and Madison County government*
- *Special Interest Group Comments*
 - *The Biltmore Company*
 - *Asheville Bear Creek RV Park and Campground*
 - *EWANA*
 - *Woodland Hills of Asheville Homeowners Association*
 - *Asheville on Bikes*
 - *MountainTrue*
 - *Asheville Design Center*
 - *Council of Independent Business Owners*
 - *Asheville Sierra Club*
 - *WECAN*
 - *Southern Environmental Law Center*
 - *Montford Neighborhood Association*
 - *I-26 ConnectUs*
- *Project Opinion*
 - *22.4 percent (332) generally in favor of the project*
 - *71.6 percent (1,062) generally opposed to the project*
 - *9.2 percent (89) unanswered project opinion*
- *Excluding the form letters*
 - *36.8 percent (257) generally in favor of the project*
 - *54 percent (377) generally opposed to the project*
 - *9.2 percent (64) unanswered project opinion*
- *Alternative Preferred*
 - *In Section C*
 - *15 comments in favor of Alternative A-2*
 - *10 comments in favor of Alternative C-2*
 - *12 comments in favor of Alternative D-1*
 - *55 comments in favor of Alternative F-1*
 - *40 comments in favor of the No-Build Alternative*
 - *In Section A*
 - *97 comments in favor of the No-Build Alternative*
 - *52 comments in favor of the Widen Existing Alternative*

— *In Section B*

- 35 comments in favor of Alternative 3
- 15 comments in favor of Alternative 3-C
- 668 comments in favor of Alternative 4
- 748 comments in favor of Alternative 4-B
- 26 comments in favor of the No-Build Alternative

Note that not all comments received included a preference of alternatives.

8.2.1.4 Design Public Hearing

A Pre-Hearing Open House and Design Public Hearing were held on December 4, 2018, in the Grand Ballroom, Renaissance Asheville Hotel. The Open House began at 4:00 PM and ended at 6:30 PM. The Corridor Public Hearing began at 7:00 PM; approximately 480 people were in attendance.

The Open House was held to give interested parties an opportunity to review displays, including design maps; ask questions directly from project staff; and leave comments, both verbal and written. The Design Public Hearing consisted of a formal presentation, which included an explanation of project schedule, design features and impacts of the preferred alternative, right-of-way, relocation requirements/procedures, and the state-federal relationship.

8.2.2 SPECIAL COMMITTEES

8.2.2.1 Community Coordinating Committee

In late 1999, public concern about the project prompted the City of Asheville to request that NCDOT pursue additional public involvement. Partnering with the City of Asheville, NCDOT invited the leaders of the interested business groups, affected neighborhoods, and other public interest organizations to meet and discuss the principal issues of concern. To bring the greater community to a consensus, a CCC was formed from this group of community leaders. The CCC was formed to facilitate public involvement and acquire public input on the project. In addition to citizen representatives, the CCC was composed of representatives from the following agencies, businesses, and organizations:

- Montford Neighborhood Association
- Fairfax Avenue/Virginia Avenue Neighborhood
- Burton Street Community Association
- Southeastern Freight Lines
- ICAG
- RiverLink Inc.
- Council of Independent Business Owners
- Land of Sky Regional Council
- The Biltmore Company
- Western North Carolina Alliance (WNCA)
- Quality Forward

- McGuire, Wood & Bissette
- Biltmore Farms, LLC
- Westgate Corporation
- Out There Press
- Smart Growth Partners
- Buncombe County Planning & Development Zoning Administrator
- Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce
- City of Asheville
 - Mayor
 - Transportation Department
 - Public and Community Information Coordinator
 - Housing Authority
- FHWA
- NCDOT
 - Division 13
 - Citizens Participation Unit (*now Public Involvement Team*)
 - Project Development Environmental Assessment Branch (*now Environmental Analysis Unit*)
- TGS Engineers
- Parsons Brinckerhoff

Many meetings of the CCC have been held throughout the project development process. Records of these meetings are listed in the 2015 DEIS Appendix C and are available upon request.

8.2.2.2 Aesthetics Advisory Committee

In response to a recommendation by the CCC, the City of Asheville established an AAC to work with NCDOT and the city to address aesthetic issues throughout the planning and design of the project.

The AAC acts in an advisory capacity. Members are charged with being familiar with NCDOT policies and city ordinances. Their work must be completed in a timely manner in accordance with the project's overall schedule. They have assisted with community outreach via neighborhood group meetings, workshops, and surveys.

Members understand that any of their recommendations that are outside of NCDOT policy can be considered, but should include suggestions for funding. To assist them, NCDOT and the City jointly provide technical and functional support. NCDOT has provided technical assistance for some visualization. The city has provided meeting locations and notifications. Several meetings have used video conferencing to involve NCDOT personnel.

The committee has provided guidance on the location of the proposed planted median and the planned design of noise walls.

The AAC was composed of the following citizen, agency, and business representatives:

- Leslie Fay
- Hedy Fisher
- Peter Gentling
- Robert Camille, Camille Alberice Architects
- Alice Oglesby, I.O. Design and Illustration
- Matt Sprouse, Site Works Studios
- Scott Shuford, City of Asheville, Planning and Development
- Alan Glines, City of Asheville, Planning and Development
- Dan Baechtold, City of Asheville, Transportation and Engineering
- Rick Tipton, NCDOT
- Greg Shuler, NCDOT

Many meetings of the AAC were held in the early stages of the project development process. Records of these meetings are listed in the 2015 DEIS Appendix C and are available upon request. At the request of the City of Asheville after the 2015 Corridor Public Hearing, an AAC was reinitiated on July 24, 2018 and includes the following representatives:

- *Woodard (Woody) Farmer*
- *Michael Adams*
- *David Nutter*
- *Michael Zukoski*
- *Tal Dgani*
- *Ted Figura*
- *Susan Loftis*

8.2.2.3 I-26 Connector Working Group

In March 2016, NCDOT and the City of Asheville established the I-26 Connector Working Group, which initiated a series of meetings between members of the City of Asheville City Council, the Asheville Design Center, Buncombe County, FHWA, FBRMPO, NCDOT, and other stakeholders. The purpose of these working group meetings was to discuss methodologies for various technical aspects of the project, discuss FHWA and NCDOT policies that factor into designs of the various project alternatives, receive feedback from local officials and public citizens on various aspects of the project, discuss bicycle/pedestrian accommodations and betterment requests from the City of Asheville, among other topics. The I-26 Connector Working Group will continue to coordinate with NCDOT throughout development of the project and into final design.

A list of the working group meetings held to date is listed below and included in Appendix F.

- *03/24/2016 – Working Group Meeting #1 – City of Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.*
- *06/03/2016 – Working Group Meeting #2 NCDOT Division 13 Buncombe County Maintenance Office, Asheville, NC.*

- 08/06/2016 – Working Group Meeting #3 – NCDOT Division 13 Buncombe County Maintenance Office, Asheville, NC.
- 09/20/2016 – Working Group Meeting #4 – NCDOT Division 13 Buncombe County Maintenance Office, Asheville, NC.
- 10/17/2016 – Working Group Meeting #5 – City of Asheville Fire and Police Training Room, Asheville, NC.
- 11/18/2016 – Working Group Meeting #6 – Land of Sky Regional Council, Asheville, NC.
- 02/20/2017 – Working Group Meeting #7 – Land of Sky Regional Council, Asheville, NC.
- 05/26/2017 – Working Group Meeting #8 – Land of Sky Regional Council, Asheville, NC.
- 07/27/2017 – Working Group Meeting #9 – Land of Sky Regional Council, Asheville, NC.
- 07/31/2018 – Working Group Meeting #10 – Land of Sky Regional Council, Asheville, NC.
- 02/21/2019 – Working Group Meeting #11 – City of Asheville Fire and Police Training Room, Asheville, NC.

In April 2018, NCDOT began coordinating with the City of Asheville’s consultant Sam Schwartz on various design recommendations from the City of Asheville. One of these recommendations included revising this interchange to an urban diamond type configuration. Alternative 4-B was revised to include a diamond interchange at the I-26/I-240/Patton Avenue, which required the addition of approximately 8.5 acres of right of way; however, no additional residential relocations were necessary, and one business relocation was eliminated. The full analysis of Alternative 4-B by the City of Asheville and their design recommendations for Section B was finalized in September 2018 and is included in Appendix B.

8.3 PUBLIC COMMENTS ON THE 2015 DEIS

Comments received on the 2015 DEIS and at the Corridor Public Hearing were considered jointly by NCDOT at the post hearing meeting held on January 26, 2016. A summary of the comments and responses to the public comments received is included in Appendix H.

8.4 CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

During the course of the project, controversial issues have been identified through the public involvement process. The primary issues were the need for eight lanes versus six lanes to adequately increase capacity on I-240 (Section A of the project), and the separation of local and interstate traffic. These issues have been resolved with the selection and refined designs of the preferred alternative.