

ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION

I-26 ASHEVILLE CONNECTOR

Buncombe County, North Carolina
Federal Aid Project No. NHF-26-1(53)
WBS Element 34165.1.2
STIP I-2513

FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

VOLUME 1 OF 2

U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration
and
North Carolina Department of Transportation

Submitted Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act 42 U.S.C. 4332(2)(c)

1/9/2020 
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1/9/2020 
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The documented needs for the transportation project in Buncombe County are presented in the report. The existing conditions of the study area are described and the alternatives are assessed in terms of environmental impacts, compatibility with local planning goals, relative cost-effectiveness and public opinion.

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January 2020

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For the:

North Carolina Department of Transportation

January 9, 2020 
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Project Commitments

- Endangered Species
 - The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is coordinating with the US Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the proposed project’s potential effects on endangered species. Section 7 compliance for the gray bat (*Myotis grisescens*) and Appalachian elktoe (*Alasmidonta raveneliana*) will be sought and secured prior to signing the Record of Decision (ROD).
- Environmental Justice
 - NCDOT has developed the Burton Street Neighborhood Plan through coordination with members of the Burton Street Community Association. The plan lists mitigation strategies to be implemented by NCDOT to address and mitigate the anticipated impacts to the Burton Street neighborhood due to the proposed project. These include the following:
 - 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
 - Although the Burton Street Neighborhood Plan indicates that the Community Baptist Church will be displaced, the project designs have since been refined to eliminate the need to relocate this property. Only a small portion of the parking lot is anticipated to be impacted, and the church will not need to be relocated.
- Historic Architectural Resources
 - Pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) concurred with NCDOT's determination that the preferred alternative would have an “adverse effect” on a local landmark, Riverside Cemetery, within the Montford Area Historic District. NCDOT is working with the newly-formed

Asheville Aesthetics Advisory Committee (AAC) to design appropriate landscaping measures to minimize the visual effects of the elevated roadway adjacent to the cemetery. Further coordination regarding mitigation opportunities for this resource will occur during development of the Section 106 MOA.

- Pursuant to Section 106, the SHPO concurred with the determination that there would be a “no adverse effect” on the Aycock Primary School, a resource within the West Asheville/Aycock School Historic District, due to the mitigation measures associated with the environmental commitments made by NCDOT. Right-of-way would need to be acquired within the historic district’s boundaries; however, with regard to the existing stone wall, arrowhead monument, and several trees at the school, protective measures will be utilized during construction.
- Redesign of the Aycock Primary’s School’s (part of the historic West Asheville/Aycock School Historic District) traffic pattern and purchase of a vacant lot on Argyle Lane could recoup the 25 parking spaces impacted and alleviate the access issues. Construction easements would increase with this scenario but NCDOT is investigating the constructability and design details for the new parking lot in consultation with the school and HPO. In addition to recouping the 25 parking spaces, NCDOT commitments include the:
 - Preservation of screening trees along the west side of classrooms
 - Installation of fencing (six feet in height at a minimum and the school’s chosen material) between the greenway and the school yard
 - Protection of the trees and Arrowhead monument on school grounds during construction
- Pursuant to Section 106, the SHPO concurred with the determination that there would be a “no adverse effect” on the William Worley House. NCDOT has coordinated with the property owner and has committed to reimbursing the owner for the costs to install central heat/AC, storm windows, and insulation based on the lowest of 3 bids provided to NCDOT by the property owner.
- Pursuant to Section 106, the SHPO concurred with the determination that there would be a “no adverse effect” on the Freeman House. NCDOT has coordinated with the property owner and has committed to reimbursing the owner for the costs to install central heat/AC, storm windows, and insulation based on the lowest of 3 bids provided to NCDOT by the property owner. In addition, NCDOT will install landscaping along the edges of their property facing the new facility.
- NCDOT is coordinating with the property owners of the historic architectural resources and determining appropriate mitigation for the sites, which will be included in the e106 Form for Adverse Effect and incorporated in the stipulations of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA).
- Archaeological Resources
 - Archaeological Site 31BN826 is recommended National Register of Historic Places (NRHP)-eligible under Criterion D and will be adversely affected; therefore, portions of this site within the new right-of-way will be mitigated by a data recovery plan once right-of-way is acquired.

- Site 31BN828 and 31BN825, which are recommended NRHP-eligible under Criterion D, are within proposed or existing right-of-way, and will be avoided during the construction phase of the project. If avoidance of adverse effects to 31BN828 and 31BN825 are deemed not possible at a later date, a data recovery plan should be developed and executed to compensate for impacts to the sites.
- Deep testing is required in five locations covering approximately 22 acres and five unassessed sites (31BN823, 31BN868, 31BN870, 31BN871, and 31BN873) that are within the existing right-of-way. This work will be done once right-of-way is acquired by NCDOT. If any are determined eligible for the NRHP, NCDOT will coordinate with SHPO and other consulting parties as identified on appropriate mitigation.
- All potential mitigation at these sites will be covered in the e106 Form for adverse effect and incorporated in the stipulations of the MOA. The MOA will be completed and filed with the ACHP prior to signature of the ROD.
- Placement of bents would be required for bridges being constructed over the French Broad River. NCDOT will place signage along the river warning of construction activities. NCDOT will work with Buncombe County Parks and Recreation (BCPR) to alert boaters of the construction at BCPR's boat launch locations. In addition, safe passage lanes under the bridge will be provided for the duration of construction.
- The preliminary traffic noise analysis conducted for the proposed project found 6 locations where noise barriers may be feasible and reasonable. A more detailed review will be completed during project final design to determine whether these or other noise barriers are feasible and reasonable.
- The City of Asheville has requested the inclusion of bicycle and pedestrian betterments in the project design. The construction of the betterments as part of the proposed project will be dependent upon a cost-sharing and maintenance agreement between NCDOT and the City of Asheville. NCDOT will continue to coordinate with the City of Asheville on the inclusion of bicycle and pedestrian facilities.
- The City of Asheville has established an Aesthetics Advisory Committee (AAC) to work in an advisory capacity to address aesthetic treatments that may be incorporated in the proposed project. NCDOT will coordinate with the AAC and the City of Asheville throughout the remaining planning and design of the project.
- NCDOT will coordinate with the City of Asheville regarding maintenance of traffic on the French Broad River Greenway during development of final plans for the project.
- The recommended lane changes that improve operations at the Acton Circle and Smokey Park Highway intersection will be included in final design.
- NCDOT is committed to minimizing the overall footprint of the project, and additional concepts developed in cooperation with the City of Asheville will be considered as part of the Design-Build process.
- NCDOT will manage invasive plant species on the Department's right-of-way, as appropriate.
- During construction, every feasible effort will be made to minimize the generation of waste, to recycle materials for which viable markets exist, and to use recycled products and materials in the development of the project where suitable.

- Prior to the start of project construction activities, an erosion and sedimentation control plan will be prepared in accordance with the NCDOT guidelines in *Best Management Practices for Protection of Surface Waters* (NCDOT 1997) and *NCDOT Stormwater Best Management Practices Toolbox* (NCDOT 2014d). BMPs to minimize sedimentation and erosion impacts during construction include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - Scheduling construction activities to minimize exposed area and duration of exposure
 - Clearing only minimal distances ahead of grading
 - Temporary seeding, sodding, and/or mulching of disturbed areas
 - Using gravel or straw on exposed surfaces prior to revegetation
 - Revegetating as soon as possible after construction
 - Using energy dissipators at outfalls
 - Constructing temporary sediment traps
 - Using silt fences
 - Covering stockpiled materials
 - Wetting exposed areas during windy conditions
- NCDOT will complete an Interstate Access Report after the signing of the Final Environmental Impact Statement and submit to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) for review and comments, prior to completion of the ROD.
- A workplan will be developed based on the final design to address any contaminated material that may be encountered at Hazardous Materials Site 45. FHWA suggests testing this site prior to right-of-way acquisition so any cleanup cost of the site due to hazardous materials may be considered at the time of right-of-way acquisition.
- Sampling of the landfill site along the French Broad River will be conducted prior to right of way acquisition. A work plan will be developed based on the final design to address any contaminated material that may be encountered during construction.

Summary

Federal Highway Administration

Administrative Action: Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

The content of this FEIS conforms to the requirements of the Council on Environmental Quality guidelines, which provide direction regarding implementation of the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) *Guidance for Preparing and Processing Environmental and Section 4(f) Documents* (USDOT/FHWA 1987) and updated Section 4(f) regulations in 23 CFR 774.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) and FHWA are the lead agencies for the proposed project.

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Overview

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for NCDOT State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) project I-2513 (I-26 Connector) was approved in October 2015. A corridor public hearing was held in November 2015 following distribution of the DEIS. The purpose of the corridor public hearing was to obtain public input on the detailed study alternatives presented in the DEIS. This FEIS is a continuation of the project development process. The DEIS provides the basis for the FEIS. The final step in the process will be the publication of a Record of Decision, and a notice of availability, in the Federal Register. This environmental process includes opportunities for all interested parties to participate in the process and contribute comments, questions, and

suggestions. The FEIS summarizes the materials contained in the DEIS and presents the information about the new and updated analyses that were completed after the DEIS was distributed.

At a NEPA/Section 404 merger team meeting held on May 18, 2016, the merger team, which is made up of environmental resource and regulatory agencies, concurred on Alternative F-1 in Section C, the I-240 Widening Alternative in Section A, and Alternative 4-B in Section B as the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative (LEDPA) for the proposed project, in accordance with the procedures detailed in the NEPA/Section 404 Merger Process.

The following summary provides a synopsis of the information presented in the body of the FEIS and is meant to convey a brief summary of general information about the project. For a more detailed description of the elements of the study, please refer to the information presented in the body of the FEIS. At the end of this summary, Table S-1 presents a quantitative summary of the project impacts.

Purpose and Need

What is the I-26 Connector project?

The I-26 Connector project is an interstate freeway project that would connect I-26 in southwestern Asheville to US 19-23-70 in northwest Asheville and have a total length of approximately 7 miles. The I-26 Connector would extend I-26 from I-40 to US 19-23-70 and would allow for the eventual designation of I-26 from Charleston, South Carolina, to Johnson City, Tennessee, once a remaining section from the north end of this project to Mars Hill, North Carolina, is completed. The I-26 Connector would upgrade and widen I-240 from I-40 to Patton Avenue and then cross the French Broad River as a new freeway to US 19-23-70 slightly south of the Broadway interchange.

Why is the I-26 Connector needed?

The project is needed to address traffic capacity problems along the existing I-240 corridor (future I-26), across the Captain Jeff Bowen Bridges to US 19-23-70. Presently numerous areas do not meet interstate design standards and cannot be designated I-26 without being improved. The project would improve traffic flow, address substandard roadway features, and provide an interstate roadway through West Asheville for the I-26 Corridor.

What is the history of the I-26 Connector?

The I-26 Connector was first studied as part of the Asheville Urban Area Corridor Preservation Pilot Project from 1989 to 1995. A preferred corridor was identified in the *Phase I Environmental Analysis – Asheville Urban Area* report (NCDOT 1995). Since 1995, the NCDOT Project Development and Environmental Analysis Branch has been working with the community and conducting detailed studies for the project.

In 2000, NCDOT held the Project Educational Forum and the Project Design Forum, which added the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange to the project and included several new alternatives for the area

around the Captain Jeff Bowen Bridges. A DEIS was released in March 2008, and a public hearing was held on September 16, 2008. Due to several changes in the project alternatives and the technical studies for the project, the 2008 DEIS was rescinded and replaced by the 2015 DEIS. A public hearing was held for the 2015 DEIS on November 16, 2015. Since that time, NCDOT has held numerous meetings with community leaders, local interest groups, business groups, and affected businesses and neighborhoods to explain the proposed project.

How will traffic operate if the project is not built?

Traffic operations are evaluated using a “Level of Service (LOS)” rating ranging from A (best) to F (worst). Federal law (23 U.S.C. 109(b)) and regulation (23 CFR 625.4(a)) require this project to accommodate the types and volumes of traffic anticipated for such project for the 20-year period commencing on the date of approval of the plans, specifications, and estimates for construction of such project. LOS D has been determined to be an acceptable requirement for interstates in urban areas. In 2015, 11 of the 80 freeway elements were operating at an unacceptable LOS of E or F, and 3 of 14 signalized intersections were operating at an unacceptable LOS of E or F.

What are the existing safety problems along the corridor?

To evaluate safety along the corridor, the roadways were broken into 10 segments and crash data were analyzed to determine whether the crash rates exceeded the statewide average for similar facilities or whether they exceeded the critical crash rate. This allows identification of segments that have statistically significant crash rates that may denote a safety deficiency. Six of the 10 segments exceeded the statewide average and the critical crash rate. One segment exceeded the statewide average. Based on an analysis of the types of crashes for the segments that exceeded the critical crash rate, it is apparent that rear-end collisions due to vehicles being stopped or slowed down make up the majority of the accidents.

What are the roadway deficiencies along the existing corridor?

The existing route that is currently serving I-26 traffic has numerous design deficiencies that do not meet current standards. The corridor was evaluated based on 19 design criteria and 24 locations were shown to have at least one substandard element; 14 of these locations had multiple deficiencies.

The most common deficiency in the existing corridor is substandard horizontal clearance, including locations where bridge widths are inadequate. Of the 24 locations with roadway deficiencies, 12 locations are due to bridge width and horizontal clearance deficiencies; for an additional 7 locations, bridge width or horizontal clearance is a contributing factor.

Geometric deficiencies can be found at 12 locations. Geometric deficiencies occur where there are inadequate speed change lanes, substandard horizontal or vertical alignment, low vertical clearance at structures, left-hand entrances or exits, and interchanges that do not provide for all movements.

Other existing deficiencies include undesirable cross-section elements such as vertical curbs and narrow roadway shoulders in five locations, three locations with deficient stopping sight

distance, and one location with a break in the control of access. Table 1-4 in the body of the FEIS provides a complete summary of the existing deficiencies and the sites where they are located.

Alternatives

What are the different sections of the project?

The project is broken into three separate sections. The first section, Section C, was added after the Project Design Forum in 2000 and includes the area around the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange. Section A of the project is the widening and improvements along I-240 from slightly north of the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange to slightly south of Patton Avenue. Section B of the project is from slightly south of the Patton Avenue interchange to US 19-23-70 near the Broadway interchange and includes a new roadway and bridges across the French Broad River. Section B also includes improvements to Riverside Drive.

What alternatives were considered for the I-26 Connector?

NEPA requires that a full range of alternatives be considered for this project. Five general types of alternatives were considered and were evaluated to determine whether they could meet the stated Purpose and Need. The No-Build Alternative assumes that the study area would evolve as currently planned, but without constructing the I-26 Connector project. The Transportation Systems Management Alternatives would coordinate the individual elements of the transportation system to achieve the maximum efficiency, productivity, and utility of the existing system while minimizing cost and inconvenience to motorists. It could include improving signal timing and coordination, minor realigning of intersections, and adding turning lanes. The Travel Demand Management Alternatives would improve the efficiency of the transportation system by reducing travel demand rather than increasing the capacity of the roadway. Measures such as ridesharing, flexible work schedules, telecommuting, bicycling, and walking are often used. The Mass Transit Alternatives would provide high-capacity, energy-efficient transportation through the use of bus or passenger rail facilities. The build alternatives would include construction of transportation facilities to improve the traffic operations of the transportation system.

What alternatives were examined and eliminated from further consideration?

Following the evaluation of the preliminary alternatives, the No-Build, Transportation Systems Management, Travel Demand Management, and Mass Transit Alternatives were determined to not be reasonable because they would not meet the Purpose and Need for the project. The No-Build Alternative was carried forward under NEPA to allow for a basis of comparison of the detailed study alternatives. Therefore, the only type of alternative that would meet the Purpose and Need would be the construction of a build alternative. In order to provide the required number of lanes along this section to meet capacity demands and to meet an LOS of D or better, a detailed traffic capacity analysis was performed. The alternative evaluation considered numerous build alternatives, and several were eliminated from further consideration due to either not meeting the Purpose and Need for the project or not being feasible from an engineering standpoint.

What alternatives were selected for detailed study?

Following the evaluation of the preliminary alternatives, four build alternatives in Section C, one build alternative in Section A, and four build alternatives in Section B were selected as detailed study alternatives and analyzed in the DEIS. The following were carried forward as detailed study alternatives:

- Section C
 - Alternative A-2
 - Alternative C-2
 - Alternative D-1
 - Alternative F-1
- Section A
 - I-240 Widening Alternative
- Section B
 - Alternative 3
 - Alternative 3-C
 - Alternative 4
 - Alternative 4-B

How was the preferred alternative selected?

Following distribution of the DEIS in October 2015 and the corridor public hearing in November 2015, the NEPA/Section 404 Merger Team concurred on Alternative F-1 in Section C, I-240 Widening Alternative in Section A, and Alternative 4-B in Section C as the LEDPA. According to the Clean Water Act, the LEDPA is the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative that satisfies the purpose and need for the project. The NEPA/Section 404 Merger Team concurred on the LEDPA as the preferred alternative after considering environmental and community impacts calculated based on the proposed preliminary designs presented in the 2015 DEIS and public comments gathered on the DEIS.

What design refinements occurred as a part of the preliminary design revisions for the preferred alternative?

Following the publication of the DEIS, the FBRMPO revised its travel demand model. This revised model and associated revisions to the traffic forecast and capacity analysis allowed the design team to incorporate several refinements into the project to reduce impacts of the preferred alternative. Major design refinements of the preferred alternative include:

- Reducing the number of through lanes in Section A from eight lanes to six lanes
- Eliminating the Amboy Road Extension and reconfiguring the design between Amboy Road and Brevard Road to include a split diamond configuration and a multi-use path adjacent to the eastbound ramp
- Positioning Amboy Road under I-26 to reduce potential impacts to the Fairfax Avenue/Virginia Avenue communities and Carrier Park
- Eliminating the collector/distributor roads in Section C

- Eliminating the left-over turn lane for eastbound Patton Avenue traffic to access the Westgate Shopping Center
- Realigning the West Asheville Greenway to follow the proposed ramp in the southeast quadrant of the I-26/Patton Avenue interchange in order to eliminate various impacts
- Reconfiguring I-26/I-40/Patton Avenue interchange to a traditional diamond interchange.

How many lanes would be included for the I-26 Connector?

The design standards, set by the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHTO), for interstate facilities require that the design must accommodate the traffic volumes for at least 20 years from the time the project begins construction. Therefore, the minimum number of lanes required to accommodate the projected traffic volumes were evaluated for each section of the project. The I-26 Connector would include six through travel lanes (three in each direction) for the section from I-40 to Patton Avenue (where it is combined with I-240) and six through travel lanes (three in each direction) from Patton Avenue to Broadway. The DEIS evaluated eight through travel lanes in Section A; however, the results of updated traffic analyses after selection of the preferred alternative resulted in the recommendation of a six-lane typical section for basic freeway lanes on I-26/I-240, from I-40 to US 19-23-70, for the preferred alternative.

How would traffic operate for the preferred alternative once the I-26 Connector is constructed?

The preferred alternative is designed to accommodate the projected 2040 traffic volumes at a LOS of D or better within the limits of construction for the proposed project.

Would there be any roadway deficiencies after the project is completed?

The refined design for the preferred alternative includes design features that are not preferred, but are acceptable for inclusion as an interstate route. In addition, the preferred alternative would not address some of the roadway deficiencies that are beyond the limits of construction and were not essential to the I-26 Connector project. The substandard elements not included within the construction of the I-26 Connector project could be addressed as part of another project in the future. Some deficiencies that previously occurred in the designs used to analyze detailed study alternatives in the DEIS have been eliminated due to design refinements of the preferred alternative. Some deficiencies remain due to various constraints or in an effort to minimize impacts.

How much would the preferred alternative cost?

The cost of the preferred alternative includes the cost to construct the roadway, purchase the right-of-way for the roadway, and relocate utilities. The total cost of the preferred alternative is as follows:

Section C – Alternative F-1	\$217,457,000
Section A – I-240 Widening Alternative	\$199,441,000

Section B – Alternative 4-B \$564,943,000*

*Section B estimate includes Riverside Drive improvements, formerly STIP project U-5868.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

Community Effects

How would the project impact community facilities and services?

The DEIS reported impacts to the French Broad River Greenway; however, design refinements to the preferred alternative have avoided impacting this resource. The preferred alternative would impact the existing Amboy Road frontage of Carrier Park for additional right-of-way and construction easements. This area is currently utilized for parking, and according to local officials, future plans for the park include the removal of this parking area.

While no schools would be displaced by the preferred alternative, it is anticipated that temporary impacts and changes in access would result for the Isaac Dickson School located on Hill Street. In addition, the existing driveway that connects to the I-240 eastbound entrance ramp at Haywood Road in Section A would be eliminated, requiring access modifications to Aycock Primary School.

The EIS Relocation Reports and the Burton Street Neighborhood Plan indicate that Community Baptist Church in the Burton Street Community would be displaced as a result of the preferred alternative in Section A; however, designs have since been refined to eliminate the need to relocate this property. Only a small portion of the parking lot is anticipated to be impacted, and the church will not need to be relocated.

The First Church of God at 20 Hanover Street south of Haywood Road may be affected, but not relocated by the project. Widening existing I-240 and modifying the exit ramp to Haywood Road may change the existing access to the First Church of God due to the closure of Hanover Street at Haywood Road.

How would the project affect neighborhoods and community cohesion?

Several communities located within the study area show signs of cohesion and several communities have strong neighborhood bonds. Overall, the proposed project is not anticipated to result in substantial negative effects to the cohesiveness of the overall study area. In Section C, the preferred alternative no longer directly impacts the Clairmont Crest and Willow Lake Mobile Home Park communities. Noise impacts reported in the DEIS would likely be reduced due to the shift in the preliminary designs to the south. In Section A, the proposed project is anticipated to displace some housing units in the Kentucky/Hanover/Pisgah View Area community, Burton Street community, and Fairfax Avenue/Virginia Avenue community. However, the overall effect of the preferred alternative on the Fairfax Avenue/Virginia Avenue community is anticipated to provide better local connectivity to and circulation within the community, including a direct vehicular and pedestrian connection to Carrier Park.

In Section B, the proposed project is anticipated to displace some housing units in the Westwood Place community and Burton Street community. The Hillcrest Apartment community would receive benefits from the project by enhancing access and mobility to the network.

How would the project affect concentrations of low income or minority populations?

The effects on low-income and minority populations were evaluated based on the effects to neighborhoods and communities, combined with the identification of communities that had high concentrations of low-income or minority populations. After evaluation in the DEIS, it was recommended that additional public outreach occur for the Burton Street neighborhood to determine ways to mitigate the impacts of the proposed project. NCDOT, in coordination with the Burton Street Community Association and the City of Asheville Planning and Neighborhood Services Department, received input from residents and stakeholders within the community as to what additional transportation improvements might be made in the area to offset or lessen the burden of the overall project impacts. A community-driven Burton Street Neighborhood Plan has been developed and includes a list of strategies that will be implemented by NCDOT to mitigate impacts from the proposed project.

Would the project be consistent with local and regional plans?

There are over 20 local and regional plans that include recommendations for areas within the project study area. Based on an evaluation of these plans, the preferred alternative is generally consistent with the plans.

The purpose of the project does not require that the preferred alternative meet the recommendations of the local plans.

How would the project affect bicycle and pedestrian transportation?

In general, the I-26 Connector project would improve both bicycle and pedestrian mobility within the study area through the inclusion of bicycle lanes and sidewalks on many of the cross street roadways affected by the project. The project is generally consistent with the local pedestrian, bicycle, and greenway plans. NCDOT policies prescribe that certain pedestrian improvements require partial funding by and formal requests from the local governments. After selection of the preferred alternative, the City of Asheville identified potential bicycle and pedestrian accommodations (referred to as betterments) throughout the project study area. The preferred alternative preliminary designs include some of these betterments and/or do not preclude the facilities from being constructed during the construction of the proposed project or in the future. NCDOT is currently coordinating cost-sharing with the City of Asheville for the bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

Would the project require relocating any houses, businesses, or cemeteries?

The project would require the relocation of houses and businesses to construct the improvements being made for the preferred alternative. The project would not affect any cemeteries within the study area. Relocations estimated in each section of the preferred alternative are as follows:

Section	Residential	Business	Non-Profit
Section C	14	2	0
Section A	71	14	1
Section B	29	19	1

How would the existing business community be affected?

Because the project is not diverting traffic away from the existing highway corridor, it is not likely that there would be any negative long-term effects on retail sales as a result of the proposed project. Less than half of the business relocations would be considered retail establishments and would result in a loss of retail sales if they were unable to be relocated. It is likely that some negative effects on retail sales may occur during the construction of the proposed project; however, it is not likely that the project would result in substantial effect on the retail sales in the area of the proposed project. In addition, the proposed project does not substantially alter the existing access to and from the freeway and is not likely to lead to any large commercial developments outside of the central business district; therefore, it is not likely to have a substantial adverse effect on established business districts.

Cultural Resource Effects

Would historic resources be affected?

The study area includes 16 historic resources that are either on the National Register of Historic Places or eligible for inclusion on the register. Based on consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office, the historic resources are evaluated in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the effects on the property are determined based on the magnitude of the effect on the property. Three classifications are included in the evaluation: “no effect,” “no adverse effect,” and “adverse effect.” The preferred alternative would have “no effect” for six of the historic resources. Nine additional properties were determined to have “no adverse effect” and one property was determined to have an “adverse effect” from the project.

Would archaeological resources be affected?

The study area includes four archaeological sites that have been determined to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and an additional five sites within the proposed right-of-way that would require additional evaluation to determine whether they are eligible. Further documentation of the mitigation for archaeological resources will occur during development on the Section 106 Memorandum of Agreement.

Natural Resource Effects

How would biotic resources be affected?

Biotic resources are the terrestrial and aquatic communities and wildlife within the study area. Three terrestrial communities were identified within the study area for the proposed project: Mesic Mixed Forests, Alluvial Hardwood Forests, and Maintained/Disturbed. Fragmentation and

loss of wildlife habitat would be an unavoidable consequence of the preferred alternative. However, the proposed project is not expected to result in adverse impacts to wildlife due to the existing urbanized nature of the project study area. Impacts to water resources in the project study area may result from construction activities. Temporary construction impacts due to erosion and sedimentation would be minimized through implementation of a stringent erosion control schedule and the use of best management plans. Long-term impacts to streams along the preferred alternative would be limited to stream reaches within the road facility footprint only. Impacts to stream reaches adjacent to the facility footprint would be temporary and localized during construction. Long-term impacts to adjacent reaches resulting from construction are expected to be negligible.

How would water quality be affected?

The project is not expected to have a significant effect on drainage patterns or groundwater, but would increase the amount of impervious surface due to the expanded roadway. The effects on surface water would likely be proportional to the increase in impervious surface and dependent on how feasible it would be to provide mitigation to improve the water quality. Given the minimal indirect effects of the project, any contribution of the project to cumulative effects resulting from current and planned development patterns should be minimal. For these reasons, potential indirect and cumulative effects to downstream water quality should be minimal.

What impacts would occur to waters under the jurisdiction of the United States Army Corps of Engineers?

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has jurisdiction over wetlands and streams within the study area, and any impacts to these resources will be mitigated. Impacts to streams and wetlands were calculated within the slopes stakes of the current preliminary design plus 25 feet. The reduction in impacts from the designs used in the DEIS to the current designs of the preferred alternative resulted in an overall reduction of 724 linear feet of stream impacts and reduction of 0.63 acre of wetlands.

Would habitat used by threatened and endangered species be affected?

Buncombe County has 15 species that are protected under the provisions of Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. Of the 15 species listed for Buncombe County, only eight of the species have habitat present within the study area. It was determined that the biological conclusion for the Appalachian elktoe and gray bat would be “may affect, likely to adversely affect.” The biological conclusion for ten threatened or endangered species was that the project would have “no effect.” Surveys were conducted to investigate the presence of roosting and foraging habitat for gray bat. All bridges/overpasses and culverts that met minimum size requirements (5 feet by 200 feet) within the project study area were checked for evidence of bat use. This included checks of bridges that span the French Broad River including the I-40 dual bridges, and bridges on Amboy Road, Haywood Road, and Pearson Bridge Road, among others. Two culverts showed evidence of bat use. Section 7 compliance for the gray bat (*Myotis grisescens*) will be sought and secured prior to signing the Record of Decision (ROD).

The Freshwater Mussel Survey Report completed by NCDOT in January 2018 evaluated the presence of freshwater mussels within the project study area and noted the Appalachian elktoe was not found at any sites within the project study area. The study did indicate, however, that Appalachian elktoe are present in the mainstream French Broad River upstream of surveyed sites, approximately 1.5 river miles from the project study area boundary. Therefore, NCDOT is assuming presence and Section 7 compliance for the Appalachian elktoe (*Alasmidonta raveneliana*) will be sought and secured prior to signing the ROD.

Physical Characteristic Effects

How would traffic noise levels change?

For Design Year 2040 traffic volumes, the Build condition resulted in 112 predicted traffic noise impacts within Section A, 134 predicted traffic noise impacts within Section B and 171 predicted traffic noise impacts within Section C.

Furthermore, temporary construction noise impacts – some of them potentially substantial – may occur due to the close proximity of numerous noise-sensitive receptors to project construction activities. It is the recommendation of this traffic noise analysis that all reasonable efforts should be made to minimize exposure of noise-sensitive areas to construction noise impacts.

Would the project include noise walls?

A traffic noise evaluation was performed that identified 8 noise barriers that preliminarily meet feasibility and reasonableness criteria found in the NCDOT Traffic Noise Policy. A more detailed analysis will be completed during project final design. Noise barriers preliminarily found to be feasible and reasonable during the preliminary noise analysis may not be found to be feasible and reasonable during the final design noise analysis due to changes in proposed project alignment and other design considerations, surrounding land use development, or utility conflicts, among other factors. Conversely, noise barriers that preliminarily were not considered feasible and reasonable may meet the established criteria and be recommended for construction.

How would the project affect air quality?

The proposed project is located in Buncombe County, which complies with the NAAQS. The proposed project is located within an attainment area; therefore, 40 CFR Parts 51 and 93 are not applicable. Therefore, the project is not anticipated to create any adverse effects on the air quality of this attainment area. This evaluation completes the assessment requirements for air quality of the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments and the NEPA process.

How would the visual quality be changed?

Visual impacts of Section B would generally be enhanced or improved for those using the facility and degraded for those viewing the freeway from off the road. The preferred alternative would include two additional flyover bridges across the French Broad River; one approximately 285 feet

south and one approximately 550 feet to the north of the I-26 crossing. The three new bridges across the French Broad River would introduce new prominent features that would be out of context with the existing viewshed. Conversely, opportunities for views and new vistas of Asheville, the French Broad River, and surrounding mountains and hills would exist for motorists using the new roadway. The proposed design that would reconfigure the I-240 interchange with US 19-23-70/Patton Avenue would generally be consistent with the existing visual environment.

How would the project affect hazardous material sites?

Based on preliminary evaluations of hazardous materials within the study area, it was determined that the severity of impact as a result of crossing any of the sites would be low, with the exception of the landfill along the east bank of the French Broad River. Impacts to the former landfill would be classified as high.

How would the project affect floodplains?

Due to the linear nature of the project and the existing roadway configurations, the preferred alternative would not completely avoid impacts to floodplains. Impacts to floodplains will be minimized to the greatest extent possible.

Indirect and Cumulative Effects

What indirect and cumulative effects could be expected within the study area as a result of the project?

The proposed project is not anticipated to result in substantial indirect or cumulative effects. Indirect effects are effects that occur later in time as a result of the project, including changes in land use, population density, or growth rate. In general, the project is located within a developed area and would not be providing additional access to areas that are currently not developed. The project does have the potential to somewhat accelerate planned infill, redevelopment, and development in the vicinity of the project; however, it is not expected to result in a noticeable impact to natural resources or downstream water quality. Cumulative effects are effects on the environment that occur from the incremental effect of the project combined with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects. Overall, the proposed project, while affecting some neighborhoods through relocations, improving traffic flow in the general vicinity, and combining with other development activity in the area, imparts low to moderate cumulative effects in the Asheville area.

Required Permits and Actions

What permits would be required for the I-26 Connector project?

The project is anticipated to require the following permits:

- North Carolina Division of Water Quality: Section 401 Certification and Stormwater Certification
- North Carolina Division of Forest Resources: Burning Permit

- United States Army Corps of Engineers: Section 404 Permit and Section 10 Permit
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service: Section 404 and Section 10 Permit Review and Section 7 Consultation: Appalachian Elktoe and Gray Bat.

What are the unresolved issues for the I-26 Connector project?

Issues that will need to be resolved as the project development process continues include additional coordination, investigation, and documentation relating to historic resources; additional hazardous material investigations; coordination on threatened and endangered species effects and mitigation; coordination with permitting and regulatory agencies; and municipal agreements with the City of Asheville for bicycle, pedestrian, and aesthetic betterments to be incorporated as part of the project.

Section 4(f)

Would resources that are protected by Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 be used?

Section 4(f) provides protection to historic properties, public parks, and recreation areas. The preferred alternative would result in a “use” of four historic properties and one park/recreation area. Use of a Section 4(f) property occurs when land is permanently incorporated into a transportation facility; or when there is a temporary occupancy of land that is adverse in terms of the statute's preservation purpose; or when there is a constructive use (a project's proximity impacts are so severe that the protected activities, features, or attributes of a property are substantially impaired). The following resources would include use of a Section 4(f) property: Asheville School (Section C), West Asheville/Aycock School Historic District (Section A), the William Worley House (Section B), Carrier Park (Section A), and one archaeological site.

Would any of the impacts to resources protected by Section 4(f) be de minimis impacts?

De minimis impacts are impacts that would not result in an “adverse effect” on the protected resource. For historic properties, *de minimis* impacts are defined as a determination of “no adverse effect” or “no historic properties affected” in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. For parks and recreational facilities, *de minimis* is defined as impacts that do not “adversely affect the activities, features, and attributes” of the protected resource. For the proposed project, the following protected properties would be considered *de minimis* impacts: the Asheville School, the West Asheville/Aycock School District, the William Worley House, Haywood Street United Methodist Church, Carrier Park (Section A), and archaeological site 31BN623.

Public and Agency Involvement

What are the opportunities for public involvement in the I-26 Connector project?

There have been numerous opportunities for public involvement over the past decade that have provided important insight into the study area and the potential alternatives for the project. A public hearing was held on November 15, 2016, at the Renaissance Hotel to solicit input from the

public and to answer any questions about the project. Since the public hearing, NCDOT has coordinated with several local officials and communities to discuss the proposed impacts of the preferred alternative and potential design revisions. Another public hearing will be held following the publication of the FEIS, and the public is strongly encouraged to attend, ask questions, and provide comments on the preferred alternative presented for the project.

How do I provide comments on the I-26 Connector project?

Comments can be provided as either written or verbal comments. Verbal comments will be taken at the public hearing and through the project hotline. Written comments can be made in one of three ways: by e-mail to dweaver@ncdot.gov, through the web site at <https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/asheville-i-26-connector>, or via mail to:

Derrick Weaver, PE
Environmental Policy Unit Head-North Carolina Department of Transportation
1548 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1598

What comments and concerns have been expressed by the public during previous public involvement efforts?

NCDOT received approximately 1,483 comment sheets, e-mails, letters, form letters, hotline calls, verbal comments, and/or Engage NCDOT posts regarding the project.

The major comments and concerns expressed by the public include the following:

- Minimization of the project footprint
- Concerns about the impacts to residences and businesses and how it would affect the local economy and tax base
- Comments requesting a greater emphasis on multi-modal amenities such as bicycle, pedestrian, and transit solutions

What comments and concerns have been expressed by the environmental resource and regulatory agencies?

There has been coordination with environmental resource and regulatory agencies throughout the duration of the project development process. Currently, no major comments have been raised by the agencies.

What are the controversial issues for the I-26 Connector?

The two main issues of controversy for the project were the need for eight lanes for Section A of the project to accommodate the projected future traffic volumes and the local desire to have the separation of local and interstate traffic included as part of the Purpose and Need. With the selection of the preferred alternative and design revisions as a part of updated traffic analyses, these controversial issues have been resolved.

Next Steps***When will construction on the I-26 Connector begin?***

Construction for the project is to begin in 2021.

Quantitative Summary of Project Impacts

A summary of the impacts for the preferred alternative compared to the impacts of the preferred alternative as presented in the DEIS are summarized in Table S-1.

Table S-1: Summary of Project Impacts by Section

Resource	Section C (I-26/I-40/I-240 Interchange)		Section A		Section B (New Location across French Broad)	
	Alternative F-1		I-240 Widening		Alternative 4-B	
	Draft EIS	Final EIS	Draft EIS	Final EIS	Draft EIS	Final EIS
Project Features						
Length (miles)						
I-26	2.2	2.2	2.0	2.0	2.5	2.5
I-40/I-240	2.8	2.8	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.5
Total Length	5.0	5.0	2.0	2.0	4.0	4.0
Interchanges	3	3	3	3	3	3
Railroad Crossings	2	2	0	0	5	5
Navigable Waterway Crossings	1	1	0	0	4	4
Construction Cost	\$203,300,000	\$200,570,000	\$105,700,000	\$152,903,000	\$291,300,000	\$448,193,000
Right-of-Way Cost	\$17,100,000	\$12,423,000	\$29,400,000	\$44,502,000	\$36,800,000	\$95,374,000
Utilities Cost	\$2,100,000	\$4,464,000	\$3,400,000	\$2,036,000	\$3,900,000	\$13,576,000
Total Cost	\$222,500,000	\$217,457,000	\$138,500,000	\$199,441,000	\$332,000,000	\$564,943,000
Socioeconomic Features						
Relocations						
Residential	31	14	81	71	33	29
Business	5	2	17	14	34	19
Nonprofit	0	0	1	1	1	1
Total	36	16	99	86	68	50
Schools Relocated	0	0	1	0	0	0
Churches Relocated	1	0	1	0	1	0
Parks and Recreational Areas Impacted	1	0	2	1	0	0
Cemeteries Impacted	0	0	0	0	0	0
Physical Environment						
Noise Impacts (No-Build)	193	140	181	131	243	123
Noise Impacts (before abatement)	304	171	198	112	224	134
Noise Impacts (after abatement)	274	72	94	17	89	99

Resource	Section C (I-26/I-40/I-240 Interchange)		Section A		Section B (New Location across French Broad)	
	Alternative F-1		I-240 Widening		Alternative 4-B	
	Draft EIS	Final EIS	Draft EIS	Final EIS	Draft EIS	Final EIS
Hazardous Material Sites (moderate or high) Impacted	1	0	0	0	1	1
Floodplain Impacts (acres)	16.63	14.23	8.36	6.75	3.91	2.57
Floodway Impacts (acres)	2.00	1.72	1.94	1.02	0.38	0.36
Land Use Impacts by Zoning Category (acres)						
Residential Single-Family Districts	12.5	5.4	8.4	3.5	7.5	3.9
Residential Multifamily Districts	16.0	5.4	26.5	16.8	17.0	8.9
Neighborhood Business District	0	0.0	0	0.1	0.1	0.1
Community Business Districts	0.0	0.0	4.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Industrial	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.4	0.4
Institutional District	34.5	9.5	13.6	4.1	0.4	0.1
Office	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Highway Business District	7.8	0.1	1.9	2.0	14.3	2.0
Regional Business District	27.1	0.3	0.0	0.0	10.5	6.9
Central Business District	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.3	0.1
Commercial	24.8	4.9	2.7	1.8	0.0	0.0
Resort District	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	19.6	16.9
River District	0.0	0.0	6.3	3.2	22.3	15.3
Haywood Road	--	0.0	--	4.8	--	0.0
Total	122.6	25.7	64.7	36.1	92.5	54.5
Cultural Resources						
Historic Properties – Section 106 Effects	0	0	1 Adverse Effect	0	1 Adverse Effect	1 Adverse Effect
Historic Properties Impacted	1	1	2	1	2	1
Archeological Sites Impacted	6	4	2	2	0	0
Natural Environment						
Biotic Resources (acres)						
Maintained/disturbed	171.93	157.1	91.08	81.3	124.82	121.8
Mesic Mixed Forest	111.26	105.4	47.41	42.7	40.67	32.7
Alluvial Hardwood Forest	6.55	3.7	1.50	1.4	3.88	3.8
Open Water	0.17	0.20	0	0	0.00	0
Total	289.90	266.40	139.99	125.40	169.37	158.30

Resource	Section C (I-26/I-40/I-240 Interchange)		Section A		Section B (New Location across French Broad)	
	Alternative F-1		I-240 Widening		Alternative 4-B	
	Draft EIS	Final EIS	Draft EIS	Final EIS	Draft EIS	Final EIS
Increase in Impervious Area (acres)	134.6	98.2	63.8	61.9	99.7	101.6
Stream Crossing Impacts (#)	12	12	4	5	7	7
Stream Impacts (linear feet)	1,984	1,376	798	640	2,128	2,171
Wetland Impacts (#)	12	6	1	1	2	1
Wetland Impacts (acres)	1.86	1.27	0.01	0.01	0.10	0.04
Pond Impacts(#)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pond Impacts(acres)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protected Species Adversely Affected	Unresolved	2	Unresolved	2	Unresolved	2

^a Stream, wetland, and pond impacts calculated using design slope stakes plus 25-foot buffer. All other impacts calculated using right-of-way.

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