

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is this project important?

The primary needs of the project, as defined in the Purpose and Need report are to:

- * Address traffic capacity deficiencies existing along US 321 within the project area, which will continue to worsen.
- * Address accident rates on existing US 321 within the Town of Blowing Rock. Accident rates are far higher than statewide averages for similar roads.

2. The Widening was selected as the Preferred Alternative. Will there be any opportunity to reevaluate or change the design or alignment of the Preferred Alternative?

Yes. A refined design is being developed in the selected corridor. DEIS review comments are being considered in developing the final design along with mitigation discussions. A Public Hearing on the preferred alternative will be held to present the refined alignment design(s) to the public. Comments received during the Preferred Alternative Public Hearing will be considered as the final engineering designs are prepared. The Public Hearing will be held after the release of the Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision.

3. What is the schedule for right-of-way acquisition and construction?

The 2006-2012 NCDOT Transportation Improvement Program has Right of Way Acquisition scheduled for fiscal year 2008 and construction scheduled for fiscal 2011.

4. When will the Record of Decision be completed?

The Record of Decision is scheduled to be completed in early 2007.

5. Will the Widening Alternative create construction disturbances?

In developing and implementing its construction projects, NCDOT endeavors to minimize inconveniences and disturbances to the public. This is accomplished developing a traffic management plan and including environmental and community protection requirements in our construction contracts. Construction-related mitigation commitments are contained within a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the

NCDOT and the Town of Blowing Rock. The MOU and its commitments are documented in the Final Environmental Impact Statement. Although construction impacts cannot be completely eliminated, NCDOT will take appropriate measures to help minimize them.

6. What is being done to address the project's impacts to the Green Park Historic District?

In accordance with the requirements of Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the NCDOT, the US Army Corps of Engineers, and the State Historic Preservation Officer signed a Memorandum of Agreement for the mitigation of impacts in the Green Park Historic District. The MOA and its commitments are documented in the Final Environmental Impact Statement.

7. Will the project be safe given that through and local traffic will continue to mix in Blowing Rock and the high speeds at which people choose to drive?

The project will be designed in accordance with NCDOT design standards for four lane rural roads south of town and four lane urban roads within the Town of Blowing Rock. NCDOT standards are based on standards used nationwide for designing safe roads of all types. Flatter curves, better sight distances, turn lanes, and the opportunity to pass slow-moving trucks are all aspects of the Widening Alternative that will improve the safety of US 321. Enforcement of speed limits is a local responsibility. In completing the design for this project, however, NCDOT expects to continue to discuss this concern with the Town of Blowing Rock.

8. Did NCDOT take into account in your decision that 85 percent of the traffic on US 321 is through traffic?

Through traffic is defined as traffic that neither originates nor is destined for a location within the Town of Blowing Rock. A four lane US 321 will have the capacity to carry both through and local traffic.

It is a common public misperception that 85 percent or more of US 321 traffic is through traffic. Actually, the percent of through traffic varies along US 321 depending on how much local traffic is using the road at any given location. For example, the September 1998 origin and destination study conducted by the NCDOT found that the percent through traffic is approximately 78 percent near Blackberry Road, south of the Town of Blowing Rock. Between Sunset Drive and the Food Lion in Blowing Rock, the traffic is approximately 48 percent through traffic. In addition, 88 percent of the through traffic

has origins or destinations in the region (Caldwell and Watauga counties and the adjoining counties). Seventy-three percent of the through trips are people traveling between home and work.

9. As traffic congestion continues to worsen, a bypass will probably be needed anyway, therefore why not build a bypass now?

The Preferred (Widening) Alternative will serve expected travel demand for the reasonably foreseeable future. This conclusion is based on traffic forecasts for 2025. This time horizon has been used to plan highway improvements statewide. Forecasts of traffic beyond such a horizon are not considered reasonable for cost-effective highway planning.

Local traffic is growing, too. Thus, the opposite argument also could be made, that if one builds a bypass that ultimately the widening would be needed anyway.

10. Was consideration given to improving a connection between Lenoir and US 421 as an alternative to widening US 321 in Blowing Rock?

Yes. The travel distance between Hickory and Boone, however, is substantially greater on a route that includes US 421 than on US 321. For example, the distance from Hickory to Boone via US 321 is 48 miles. The distance from Hickory to Boone via US 321, NC 18, and US 421 is 80 miles, an increase of 67 percent. It is unlikely that a substantial number of through travelers would choose to use an alternate route of so much greater length.

11. Did you consider the option of making no improvements to US 321?

Yes, this possibility was considered again after the public hearing and rejected as a reasonable option for the reasons presented in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. The No-Build Alternative would result in growing congestion on US 321 in Blowing Rock and would not improve any of the features of the existing road that fail to meet contemporary design standards, such as narrow lanes and sharp curves south of the intersection of US 321 Business.

12. What will the speed limit be once the widening is complete?

After the project is completed, the posted speed limit will remain 35 miles per hour within the Blowing Rock Corporate limits and 45 miles per hour south of Town.

13. Will the Widening Alternative remove all the curves between the Green Park Inn and the southern intersection of US 321 Business and US 321?

The Widening Alternative does propose to ease curves in the Norwood Circle/Country Club Road area. Some curvature, however, would be retained. The shallower curves would provide sight distances considered desirable for traveling at 35 mph. This is an area of historically high accident rates.

14. What if my property is within the corridor of the Preferred (Widening) Alternative?

If your property must be acquired because of the project, the NCDOT has very specific guidelines for compensating and/or relocating property owners who are impacted by NCDOT improvements. The NCDOT pays fair market value for the right-of-way it purchases. The NCDOT also provides compensation for any loss of value of the remaining property when part of a property is taken and purchases any uneconomic remnants. NCDOT also provides relocation funds and assistance.

15. How many homes and businesses will be displaced by the Preferred Alternative?

12 homes and 5 businesses would be displaced.

16. Who is the NCDOT Right of Way Agent?

The name and address for the NCDOT Right of Way Agent serving your part of North Carolina is:

Jimmy Caudle, Division Right of Way Agent
North Carolina Department of Transportation
Division 11 Right Of Way Office
407 Oakwoods Road
North Wilkesboro, 28697

Mr. Caudle's phone number is (336) 667-9114. If you have additional questions, please feel free to write or call on the US 321 EIS information line: 1-800-263-2434.

17. Construction costs for the Preferred Alternative were estimated at \$45.9 million dollars. How were the cost estimates prepared?

The preparation of construction cost estimates were based on design plans and unit costs maintained and updated on continuing basis by the NCDOT. For example, the number of feet of guardrail times the current cost per foot of guardrail equals the cost of guardrail. Right-of-way costs were developed by NCDOT's right-of-way area appraisal staff. They are responsible for all right-of-way estimates and appraisals in an 18-county area that covers the Triad and Northern Mountain areas.

