

I-26 RESOLUTION

IN SUPPORT OF ALTERNATIVE 3 OF SECTION B THE NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION I-26 CONNECTOR PROJECT IN ASHEVILLE, WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

WHEREAS, the I-26 Connector is a planned interstate highway to connect I-26 from the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange southwest of Asheville, to US 19-23-70 north of Asheville; and

WHEREAS, the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce recognizes the critical link in the transportation system connecting a direct, multilane, freeway facility meeting interstate standards from the Port of Charleston, South Carolina to I-81 near Kingsport, Tennessee, particularly when conditions on I-40 necessitate that I-26 becomes the alternate route to Tennessee; and

WHEREAS, the Chamber recognizes that the best interests of all residents of Western North Carolina must be a primary consideration of the design of the I-26 Connector for improved safety of I-240 west of Asheville, improved capacity of existing I-240 west of Asheville to accommodate the existing and forecasted (2030 design year) traffic in this growing area, reduced traffic delays and congestion along the I-240 crossing of the French Broad River, and need 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; and

WHEREAS, the I-26 Connector is the largest and most important road construction project in our area in a generation; and the project history is as follows:

1989: North Carolina Department of Transportation Project I-2513 is included in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

1989 to 1995: the I-26 Connector was studied as part of the Asheville Urban Area Corridor Preservation Pilot Project to develop the Asheville Urban Area Thoroughfare Plan, a long-range regional transportation plan.

1989: as part of the Asheville Urban Area Corridor Preservation Pilot Project, the Asheville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) held a series of workshops to identify overall transportation goals and specific projects in the Asheville area, including the I-26 Connector; and the Coalition of Asheville Neighborhoods (CAN) held 15 informational meetings throughout the urban area to identify potential corridors for the I-26 Connector.

1991: the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) developed the Asheville Urban Area Transportation System Goals and Objectives and formed the Asheville Connector Advisory Committee (ACAC) to study I-26 Connector alternatives, representing 17 neighborhood, environmental and business groups.

1993: NCDOT completed a draft Phase I Environmental Analysis for the connector to the MPO and the ACAC in early 1993 (this document included data collected from environmental and design studies, and public and environmental agency involvement).

1993: the ACAC presented their recommendations to the MPO which included a preferred corridor location for the proposed route, and four public workshops were held to discuss the connector and other local thoroughfare plan recommendations.

1994: Two more public workshops were held to provide the public another opportunity to officially comment on the project.

1995: NCDOT published the final Phase I Environmental Analysis for the Asheville Urban Area, a document which contained signatures and resolutions concurring on numerous issues including a preferred corridor for the I-26 Connector (City of Asheville, the Towns of Biltmore Forest, Black Mountain, Fletcher, Montreat, Weaverville, and Woodfin, the Buncombe County Commissioners, the US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Department of Interior, the NC Wildlife Resources Commission and the NC Department of Cultural

Resources). The principal reasons cited for the selection of the preferred corridor by the study committees and the local officials in the 1995 analysis include:

- The corridor will provide the most direct route reducing vehicle miles traveled
- The corridor will not promote urban sprawl like the various bypass routes
- The corridor will cause less damage to the existing development and the natural environment in the Asheville area than any of the alternative routes suggested by the public and local officials throughout the public involvement process

1995: Late in the year, NCDOT contracted with a private consulting firm to develop conceptual engineering plans and begin environmental studies for the proposed I-26 Connector.

1997: Three alternatives (**Alternatives 1, 2 & 3**) (Section B) were selected for detailed engineering and environmental analyses within the proposed corridor to connect I-240 to US 19-23-70. Existing land use, cultural and natural resources were inventoried. Traffic noise and capacity analyses were conducted. Relocation impacts were determined and cost estimates developed. After extensive engineering and environmental studies, **Alternative 1 was eliminated.**

2000: At the request of the City of Asheville, NCDOT worked with the City to form the I-26 Connector Community Coordinating Committee (CCC), a broad-based group having representation from business, neighborhood, environmental and transportation interests. The CCC was tasked with organizing and coordinating community input, and, with the assistance of the City and NCDOT, held two major public forums to gather input. From this extensive public input, the CCC prepared a set of recommendations for the Connector project, including support for an alternative Section B alignment that provided for separation of local and interstate traffic, expediting the project's construction schedule, formation of a committee to guide project aesthetic considerations, improving local transportation connectivity as part of the project, and improving the function of the interchange at the intersection of I-40 and I-26. These recommendations were considered and endorsed by the City of Asheville and the MPO. A full I-40 and I-26 interchange has been added to the project. NCDOT added two new project alternatives, **Alternatives 4 and 5** (Section B), after an additional project study corridor expansion to separate Patton Avenue and I-240 traffic across the French Broad River (along the eastern side of the French Broad River near the Smoky Park Bridges and the area surrounding the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange).

2002: French Broad River Municipal Planning Organization (MPO) endorsed NCDOT's recommendation for eight lanes along the existing I-240 (Section A) of the project to adequately accommodate traffic demands along this route. NCDOT conducted a Citizen's Informational Forum at A-B Tech to explain to the community the information that is the basis of NCDOT's recommendation to provide eight lanes for Section A.

2004: NCCOT conducted an open-house Citizens Informational Workshop at the National Guard Armory to present alternatives for the I-26/I-40/I-240 (Section C) interchange improvements that were added as part of the I-26 Connector. (During the public design forum in 1989, many local citizens requested that the department provide the missing interstate connections between future I-26 and I-40).

2004, June: The City of Asheville and NCDOT formed a local project aesthetics advisory committee, the I-26 Aesthetics Advisory Committee, to suggest appearance details to allow the project to reflect the character of the community. NCDOT worked with this committee, and their recommendations have resulted in a proposed design revision to provide a planted median barrier along the portion of I-240 that will be improved with this project. The I-26 Aesthetics Committee also developed recommendations for the appearance of the proposed noise walls along the project.

2006, October: NCDOT conducted a Citizen's Informational workshop in Asheville to display the revised designs, answer questions and receive comments about the entire I-26 Connector project. The I-26 Aesthetics Committee gathered public input for their appearance recommendations and the Asheville Design Center (ADC) presented a new conceptual alignment for the northern new location portion of the project (Section B).

2007, March: NCDOT met with ADC representatives to discuss their review with ADC officials. NCDOT conducted further engineering before presenting their findings and a recommendation for no further evaluation of the ADC conceptual alignment to the Asheville City Council in June 2007. The City of Asheville approved funding to further evaluate the ADC proposal. In July of 2007, NCDOT conducted five informal neighborhood meetings for the Burton Street neighborhood, the Bingham Road area, the West End neighborhood, the Hillcrest neighborhood and the Westwood Place neighborhood to have additional opportunity to review and comment on the proposed project alternatives. August 2007, NCDOT eliminated further consideration of Alternative 5 (Section B) due to operational deficiencies that would worsen the traffic operations along existing I-240 east of the project in downtown Asheville (proposed constructing a new crossing of the French Broad River immediately south of the existing Smoky Park Bridges to accommodate Patton Avenue).

2008, June 28: NCDOT accepted the latest design (ADC/FIG) for Section B (new location across French Broad).

2008, September 16: NCDOT hosted a public hearing on providing virtual study data and costs for four alternates for Section B (new location across French Broad), four alternates for Section C (I-26/K-40), and one alternate for Section A (widen I-240).

WHEREAS, the Chamber wishes to recognize the outstanding contributions of citizens, NCDOT, and local government leadership to address constructive input into the design of the I-26 Connector project; and

WHEREAS, the Chamber has taken four official actions in the past regarding the I-26 Connector including:

- 1) a resolution approved on December 10, 1993, requesting that NCDOT initiate ways to reduce congestion and traffic backups during times of construction, including, but not limited to, developing incentives, alternate traffic patterns and other measures as necessary to alleviate traffic congestion and maintain the traffic flow through our region which is so essential to our economic health
- 2) a resolution on March 30, 2000 urging NCDOT to continue on schedule with plans to start construction of the I-26 Connector, while staying open to the consideration of design modifications from concerned organizations, as long as they do not delay the project;
- 3) a letter on November 15, 2004 supporting the technical analyses by NCDOT engineers which indicated that eight lanes will be necessary to meet the projected travel demand for the year 2030, complying with federal standards for level of service on interstates;
- 4) a resolution on November 23, 2004 reaffirming the importance of keeping the project on schedule and encouraging the North Carolina Department of Transportation to provide specific and appropriate state funding related to the recommendations of the I-26 Connector Aesthetics Advisory Committee for the I-4401 Project and for future design opportunities for the I-2513 Project, with the ultimate objectives of furthering economic development, complementing the environment, and improving the quality of life for the visitors and citizens of Asheville and Western North Carolina; and

WHEREAS, the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce has completed a comprehensive analysis on the four design alternatives including 2, 3, 4, and 4B of Section B of the I-26 Connector project. In its deliberations, the Chamber dedicated thoughtful consideration to the following criteria in evaluating the design options:

- Maintain the view-shed along the French Broad River
- Minimize impact on the Montford Historic District, the oldest local historic district in Asheville – particularly related to noise and visual impact to the district and Riverside Cemetery
- Maintain Westgate Plaza and protection of land value along the west side of the French Broad River
- Minimize the impact on the developable land along the east side of the river north of Patton Avenue
- Maintain the potential of a walkable, pedestrian friendly connection across the French Broad River and access to the River Arts District
- Minimize repetitive local eastbound and westbound travel distance and gasoline consumption
- Minimize impact on the east-west skyline with I-26 crossing under Patton Avenue
- Minimize environmental impact on the French Broad River and its banks
- Provide future opportunities on the east side of the river to allow for better access to downtown from West Asheville

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, after extensive research, input and consideration of the four designs as presented in the 2008 NCDOT plans and three dimensional simulation models, the Board of Directors of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce recommends the selection of Alternative 3 for Section B in the NCDOT I-26 Connector project. Alternative 3 meets the requirements of the criteria captured above concerning the quality of life, economic prosperity, protection of the environment, the safety of visitors and local citizens, and the beauty of the Asheville community. The Chamber Board encourages NCDOT to study the existing interchange on the west side of the river for simplification and looks forward to discussing important aesthetics considerations for the project and signature enhancements of the bridges.

Adopted this 25th day of November, 2008

Peter Alberice, Chairman of the Board
Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce