Community-Based Design Update

I-26 Alternative 4B

Asheville Design Center
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introduction

Since 2006, the Asheville Design Center (ADC) has continued to use its community-based design capacity to generate improvements to the 1-26 Connector that will better meet the Asheville community planning and development goals. This report provides a brief project overview, a summary of a series of related community workshops and recent important design developments from NCDOT associated with Alternative 4B.

Note: The materials presented in these pages are conceptual and schematic renderings that have resulted in the emergence of concrete design ideas; they are not intended to be sophisticated final drawings.

This document was collaboratively produced by the Asheville Design Center’s I-26 Task Force.

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NCDOT has been working on the proposed I-26 Connector since 1995. The overall project would include three sections, of which Section B is the most pertinent to this report. In Section B, I-26 would be built on a new alignment north of Patton Ave., with a new bridge over the French Broad River; it would connect to US 23/70 south of the Broadway interchange. There are currently three alternatives under consideration for this segment: Alternatives 3, 4, and 4B.

In 2000 NCDOT convened the Community Coordinating Committee (CCC) to develop consensus goals for the project. The Committee had broad representation from the community, including neighborhood, business, and environmental groups. The Committee adopted nine Key Project Design Goals (listed here).

In 2006 the Asheville Design Center presented a proposal for a new alternative in Section B; this alternative is a modification of Alternative 4 that would reduce the right-of-way needed for the project by using the existing US 23/70 alignment for part of the project.

### Community Coordinating Committee (CCC) Adopted Key Project Design Goals, 2000

1. Separation of local and interstate traffic
2. Matching scale of project to character of community
3. Reunification and connectivity of community
4. Minimization of neighborhood and local business impacts
5. Use of updated traffic modeling software and data
6. Maintenance of compatibility with community’s design vision and plans; incorporation of community-selected design features
7. Creation of full interstate movements between I-26 and I-40
8. Minimization of air quality and other environmental impacts
9. Emphasis on safety - during construction and in the design of the final product
In 2007 the City of Asheville and Buncombe County funded an engineering study of the ADC alternative by Figg Engineers. This study was conducted in close cooperation with NCDOT, and a modified version of the ADC Alternative was produced in June 2008, now referred to as Alternative 4B.

In the summer of 2008 NCDOT issued a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the project, and conducted a public hearing in September 2008. The DEIS analyzed Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 in Section B. Alternative 4B was presented along with the others at the public hearing. NCDOT subsequently agreed to add Alternative 4B as a full alternative. Alternative 2 has been dropped from consideration by NCDOT.

In an Oct. 2009 meeting between NCDOT and the Technical Review Committee (City of Asheville, Buncombe County, and ADC) NCDOT addressed one important design issue. The 2008 NCDOT version of Alternative 4B showed I-26 crossing over I-26 in West Asheville. This would have a negative visual impact, and would detract from the urban boulevard that the community hopes to see for the future Patton Avenue. NCDOT has now developed an alignment with I-26 passing under Patton Avenue; this would be less expensive than the over-Patton option by about $13 million. DOT now plans to include the under-Patton plan in the Supplemental DEIS.

The ADC, in coordination with neighborhood groups, continued to press that NCDOT study additional design changes for Alternative 4B. These include: reducing the length of elevated structure along the US 23/70 alignment west of Montford; reducing the impact on the Hill Street neighborhood; improving the aesthetics of the river crossing; and reducing noise and visual impacts.
The I-26 Task Force of the ADC conducted a Design Charrette on November 14th 2009 to explore potential improvements to NCDOT’s latest version of Alternative 4B. This one-day workshop included representatives of the Montford Neighborhood, the City’s Greenways Commission, members of the Patton Avenue Task Force, and several other interested community members.

The Charrette focused on three key areas of Alternative 4B:

1. The bridge landing and the segment of highway between Montford and the river,
2. A series of multimodal linkages to the French Broad River, and
3. The network of freeway ramps at Patton and I-240 next to the Hillcrest Community
**segment 1.1**

**bridge landing at Montford**

The impact of the bridge landing at the western edge of Montford was further mitigated by some minor, but potentially significant, highway alignment adjustments. The recommended adjustments involve reducing the amount of elevated highway and lowering the height of remaining elevation sections. These changes are intended to further reduce the noise and visual impacts to the neighborhood.
potential "bottleneck" at upcoming Broadway interchange (5 lanes merge to 2 lanes)
roadway meets grade too far north
aerial structure causes visual impacts to historic neighborhood
missed opportunity for access to river (future Wilma Dykeman Riverway)

ADC review and analysis of NCDOT drawing (segment 1, 2009)
charrette response to NCDOT drawing
segment 1.1, 2009

Community members worked together with ADC Volunteer Designers to arrive at improved design updates to this segment.

In February, NCDOT presented to the City of Asheville I-26 Technical Review Committee (TRC) a similar plan. The TRC had asked NCDOT to consider the feasibility of these potential revisions at our last meeting. NCDOT reported that these changes are possible and their version could save about $20 million in construction costs.
ADC segment 1.1 improvement concept

- elevated highway landing
- retaining wall
- bridge landing
- bike / pedestrian connection from Riverside Cemetery to River
The reconfiguration of the I-26 Corridor should provide additional opportunities to reconnect Asheville residents to the French Broad River through pedestrian and bicycle connections, not result in additional barriers to these movements. In particular, this large-scale highway project provides an opportunity to begin realizing key elements of the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan.

The November Charrette work group identified four potential pedestrian and bike connections along the East bank of I-26 Alternative 4B project area. These are referred to as “Green Connections” due to their inclusion of ecological elements such as streams and wildlife habitat along a natural, green landscape corridor.

A. Potential greenway underpass from the heart of Montford (least feasible)
B. Stream restoration and greenway from Riverside Cemetery to a proposed park
C. Greenway and/or bike lane along Hill Street extending directly to the French Broad River
D. Connection from Patton Avenue (to be reclaimed for local traffic and multimodal connections across the French Broad)
Option B involves an extension of the Riverside Cemetery path along a proposed greenway that would run beneath the freeway and across Riverside Drive to the future Wilma Dykeman Riverway.

The greenway has an opportunity to restore and day-light an existing stream previously piped under the 19/23 highway to the river. The greenway would run beneath a raised portion of the freeway at a point, possibly allowing a sun-lit, open air pathway that runs along the stream. The path would lead to a riverside park with a programmed open space that might include something like a boathouse or BMX bike park. The idea is to promote safety while creating a convenient, usable recreation space for the community. The group found that this greenway could also feasibly connect to Courtland Place.
The portion of I-26 that meets downtown Asheville and Patton Avenue on the east side of the French Broad River is perhaps the most critical, especially since it will function as both a regional and local gateway. With Alternatives 4 or 4B, this critical area has the potential to be transformed from a confusing landscape of wasteful freeway infrastructure into a vibrant urban district that connects existing areas through a variety of transportation options, attracts investment in new development, and enhances the natural environment.
does not provide access to river

unsafe intersection for pedestrians (high speed traffic and extremely long crossing distance)

poor intersection functionality

circuitous access from Patton to Hillcrest

overall corridor has poor sidewalks and no bike lanes

severe impact; taking of homes at Hill Street
charrette response to NCDOT drawing
segment 2, 2009

The design approach for this area was based largely on reducing the impact to the Hill Street area, a cluster of homes and civic buildings functioning as its own neighborhood. NCDOT’s plan for Alternatives 4 and 4B calls for shifting Hill Street, thus taking about five houses. The proposed modification involves shifting the westbound lanes of I-240 southward to meet the eastbound lanes. This reconfiguration would involve using a “jersey barrier” instead of a widely spaced median along this section of I-240, keeping with its arrangement along the northern edge of downtown. This can be considered a more urban-scaled configuration, as opposed to a suburban one.

Other adjustments include decreasing the size of the intersection where highway ramps meet Patton Avenue. Such wide approaches as shown by NCDOT impede the safe and comfortable movement of pedestrians along Patton Avenue. Consideration was also given to traffic movement from I-240 across Patton to Hilliard Street, thus facilitating traffic moving southward to the River Arts District and destinations south of downtown, such as Mission Hospital and AB Tech.

The charrette response also includes a pathway to the river from Patton Avenue and a less circuitous connection of Hillcrest to Patton Avenue.
january 2010 work session

Two key areas were identified for further study in a follow-up meeting to the November Charrette. These include the ramp network at Patton, Hillcrest and Hill Street, as well as the major interchange on the west side of the river. These remaining investigations and design interventions were conducted in an ADC Work Session with members of the Patton Avenue Task Force and other ADC Volunteers.
**study area 1**

**ramp network at Patton, Hillcrest, Hill Street**

This exhibit shows one ADC architect’s vision of how moderately dense urban development could be integrated along Patton Avenue, using land reclaimed from NCDOT. This approach involves a reconfiguration of the area’s roadway networks and freeway ramps to maximize connectivity and facilitate an extension of downtown to the Smoky Park Bridge (a multi-modal corridor to West Asheville). This plan also involves connecting Hillcrest to Patton Avenue using an urban grid.

Key to this exhibit is a direct connection from Hill Street to Patton Avenue using the freeway ramps. However, due to intersection spacing requirements, some configurations presented here may not be feasible and merited more investigation.
With further investigation, the Work Session group determined that a pedestrian-only connection from the I-240 ramps to Hill Street would eliminate the intersection spacing conflict found in the earlier exhibit. This plan also includes more regular intersection spacing along Patton Avenue. This version includes urban-scale density along Patton, a more efficient connection to the WECAN neighborhood, and enhancements to the current pedestrian crossing over I-240.
The western convergence of future I-26 and Patton Avenue is currently confusing, inefficient, and dominated by automobiles. The area marks a transition from the Smokey Park Bride to a high-traffic commercial corridor and a variety of neighborhoods in West Asheville. Businesses surrounding the current intersection have limited roadway access, resulting in missed opportunities for commerce. Most notable is the buried stream corridor, Smith Mill Creek, which flows through a culvert below the intersection.

A wide variety of opportunities exist with the coming reconstruction of this intersection to enhance business vitality, promote additional urban development, increase pedestrian and bike infrastructure, and reconnect neighborhoods.
Asheville Design Center

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Ramp impact to neighborhood not needed

Overall corridor does not allow for urban development

Smith Mill Creek is further culverted, when it should be restored

Poor connectivity from Patton to golf course and areas north

Smith Mill Creek

Neighborhood and church impacted by 8-10 lane cross section

Ramp footprint too large; too much taking of property

Overall corridor has poor sidewalks and no bike lanes

ADC review and analysis of NCDOT drawing
(study area 2, 2009)
An ADC landscape architect approached the intersection reconfiguration by considering how ecological infrastructure could be re-introduced (management of storm water with man-made wetlands, provision of wildlife habitat, creation of open space, etc.). This would facilitate a natural corridor at the base of the freeway interchange, restoring the Smith Mill Creek floodplain and having no negative effect on the efficient movement of automobiles at the roadway level. Running along Smith Mill Creek would be a greenway, enabling the safe and comfortable movement of pedestrians and cyclists by separating them from high-speed vehicular traffic.

Also featured is a redevelopment concept for the Westgate Shopping Center as a mixed-use Urban Village. This strategy would combine housing, offices, retail and open space in an area close to downtown that’s well connected to mass transit. Not to worry, there’s still plenty of room for parking.
The final drawing for this site provides an effective alternative solution to the intersection as its currently designed by NCDOT. This plan features more urban development along Patton Avenue and better multimodal connections. A major feature is a greenway along Smith Mill Creek; the greenway and the day-lighted creek would pass through the interchange; this plan would also provide a storm water management area.
recent developments and next steps

At a February 26, 2010 meeting with City Staff, County and ADC representatives, NCDOT reported that they had investigated the design of the section west of Montford, and they have developed an alignment that reduces the length of elevated highway, similar to ADC’s proposal. Due to this and other community efforts to improve the design of Alternative 4B, there is a construction cost savings of $30 Million for Alternative 4b, possibly more. Also, there is a possibility of a greenway connection from the Montford neighborhood to the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Master Plan if the City includes the connection in Greenway Master Plan. The 1-26 ROW area acquired for the bridge on the east side of the river can be used for the Riverside Park as shown on the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Master Plan. This can be done thru an existing process the City of Asheville and NCDOT have in place to use NCDOT ROW as City-maintained parks. And although, NDDOT reported that they have not been able to develop an alignment that would save the five houses in the Hill Street area, they will study this area in more detail if Alternative 4 or 4B is selected as the Preferred Alternative. Many design refinements will be considered after the selection of the Preferred Alternative. These elements could include further consideration of a Patton Avenue connection to Hillcrest, the west side 1-26 / Patton interchange, mitigation to noise and visual impacts, a signature bridge and the number of lanes required.

Community support for a preferred alternative will be a key factor in the final selection. The ADC will continue to study community concerns and present specific proposals for these items during the DEIS comment period this summer.

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