

Dear Mr. Shaw:

The NC 105 corridor serves a vast array of business and community interests. While an important local asset, this thoroughfare's impact stretches beyond the bounds of Boone and Watauga County, standing as a primary connection vessel for many businesses, residential, and tourism interests across all High Country communities.

NC 105 is a unique economic corridor, housing a high percentage of the area's hotel inventory, iconic restaurants, and a culture of businesses that provides a diverse mix of offerings not found in other areas of our local community. As this project is addressed, a question must be asked of all parties involved: Is the goal of NC 105 to serve as a designed highway or a business corridor?

The business owners and operators, land owners, and surrounding residents of the NC 105 corridor, along with the Board of Directors, Executive Staff, and members of the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, stand united in addressing the traffic volume and overall safety of this vital roadway, without destroying the vibrant business and residential community that encompasses this area.

## The Current Landscape

Project U-5603, the Proposed Upgrade of NC 105 from US 321 to NC 105 Bypass, encompasses a thriving and diverse business district within the Town of Boone. A mix of retail, restaurant residential, construction, and professional businesses draw traffic from around the region for specific and impulse visits.

The NCDOT's project goals, as described in its public meeting announcement, were to alleviate existing congestion, improve travel conditions, and to improve access management along the impacted corridor.

Based on the experience of business owners and operators, many of whom have worked and lived in this corridor for over four decades, the superstreet concept adopted in this plan will only contribute to congestion, make travel more difficult, and limit easy access to business and residential areas within this footprint.

Project U-5603 was conceptualized in part due to the Comprehensive Transportation Plan, adopted by local stakeholders in 2013. While the CTP recommended this project as part of its overall approach to traffic concerns in the region, it was not the most discussed traffic solution, nor was it suggested to be implemented as the only solution for this area. Plans for the Daniel Boone Parkway (US 421 Bypass) would have routed thru traffic away from the NC 105 corridor, thus alleviating some of the volume and congestion addressed in the listed goals for U-5603.

Many of the projects in the Watauga CTP were designed as needed alternatives to the Daniel Boone Bypass. Though traffic modeling suggested the bypass was the preferred concept, a hefty price tag of \$455 million to complete this endeavor suggested the need for alternative projects.

There have been many key changes to the landscape of the NC 105 corridor since the current CTP was adopted. The Cottages, a 60-acre, 894-bed student housing project located off Poplar Grove Road South, was opened in the Fall of 2013 and fully occupied after construction was completed in 2014. The vehicular traffic accessing this development has added to the volume of NC 105 near the NC 105 Bypass, as it serves as the main connector between the development and Appalachian State University. The Standard, a mixed-use development featuring 560 beds, was opened in the Fall of 2017 and sits on Blowing Rock Road, just two blocks off the US 321 / NC 105 intersection. Its residents and guests frequently travel through this busy intersection while also utilizing Faculty Street as an access point to NC 105 South.

Speaking of Appalachian State, the school's enrollment has grown by nearly 1,800 students since the adoption of the CTP, to a current headcount of 19,108 total students. The Watauga Campus of Caldwell Community College, located on the NC 105 Bypass, has an enrollment of 1,304 students and xxx staff that must utilize NC 105 and/or NC 105 Bypass during their daily commute.

Significant commercial investment and development has occurred in the corridor since the CTP was adopted. Some of the most notable projects include Graystone Eye and Fresinus Kidney Center, located at 2604 NC 105 South, which occupied a newly constructed 25,000 square foot facility in August of 2016. Animal Emergency & Pet Care Clinic added a new 6,400 square foot building and boarding facility to its campus, located at 1710 NC-105 South. Baymont Inn, located at 1075 NC 105 North, is in the closing phase of a \$3 million-dollar renovation project that will see the hotel transition to a Holiday Inn property in early 2019. All these investment projects are slated to see their property altered by easement or right-of-way acquisition as a result of this project.

Numerous small businesses have opened or have been renovated within the NC 105 corridor since the completion of the CTP, signaling significant investment by owners and operators to make a business home in this unique district. Many of these investors came to the High Country after the adoption of the CTP and were not informed about the possibility of this project until receiving a flyer to communicate the project, and subsequent public meeting, in late September.

## Our Concerns

After having time to digest the plans outlined in Project U-5603, we find many concerns regarding the scope of this project as it's displayed.

According to the maps shared during the public meeting, there are plans for nine turnaround bulbs included in U-5603 and other associated projects. The placement of the bulbs will require their use for travelers to access or egress from many high-volume destinations in this corridor. There were no assurances given in the recent public meeting as to how travelers would know when to utilize these turnarounds based on destination, other than to say that "people will figure this out over time." While that could be the case for local residents, the vast amount of tourist traffic that uses this roadway does not have the benefit of daily local knowledge. Asking people unfamiliar to the area to know exactly where to turnaround to access their destination, especially

during high volume travel periods, will add unnecessary confusion and can serve as a deterrent to future visits.

Based again on placement of these bulbs, motorists attempting to access high-volume destinations will stack traffic beyond the footprint shown in the design. Not allowing full movement through associated intersections will further limit attempts to make efficient maneuvers through frequently visited areas. Some areas of concern include:

- Bulbs for turns in both directions near the Highland Commons Shopping Center, which provides many residents of the adjacent neighborhood their access to the only grocery store (Ingles) on the corridor.
- Bulb on NC 105 extension North to redirect southbound traffic back toward 11 businesses that run from the US 321 / NC 105 intersection to Highland Avenue. This use will require crossing one of the highest volume intersections in the region, twice, and is also not visible to all who would stack in traffic at that intersection. How will visitors to the three hotels that are housed in that immediate area be informed to make this move? Also, as currently planned, this bulb will be completed in a separate project (U-5705) and not on the same timeline as U-5603. This would mean motorists would have no defined option for reversing direction to access the aforementioned collection of businesses until U-5705 is completed.
- Bulbs and restricted turns used near Appalachian 105 project at High School Drive. Without full understanding of the potential volume of this project, how will the impact of development change the potential traffic count, and ultimate traffic solution, for this end of the roadway?
- Bulb for turning traffic from the NC 105 Bypass toward NC 105 North. The detailed concerns about this section are listed immediately below.

Based on NCDOT traffic counts, 12,000 vehicles travel on the NC 105 Bypass through the NC 105/105 Bypass intersection daily. 11,000 of those vehicles make a left turn on to NC 105 North. Under the proposed plan, by sending all traffic right, 92% of those vehicles would be utilizing a 50'-foot dual-lane bulb to turn northbound on NC-105.

New River Building Supply, Vulcan Materials Company, Chandler Concrete Company, and Maymead Asphalt Plant all utilize large commercial trucks as part of their daily operations. In addition, the designation of NC 105 Bypass as a truck route only adds more long truck traffic to this section of roadway. The combination of the high volume of truck traffic sharing a tight turnaround with passenger vehicles will make for a dangerous maneuver through the bulb for all travelers.

The traffic volume this intersection experiences during peak travel times will only further slow traffic through this busy intersection. Furthermore, traffic that is impacted by stacked turn lanes

will be forced to travel a considerable distance down NC 105 South before finding an alternate turnaround.

As stated above, there are similar volume and travel path concerns on NC 105 in vicinity of the US321/NC 105 intersection, the location referenced in the Boone 2030 Land Use Plan as featuring the “worst traffic congestion in Boone.” As U-5603 suggests, traffic traveling NC 105 North would be required to cross the US321/NC/105 intersection and utilize a one lane turnaround to travel southbound on NC 105. After traveling back through the US 321/NC 105 intersection, customers can access the businesses located in this corridor.

The wide array of business interests in this area between the US 321/NC 105 intersection and Highland Avenue include two banks, two restaurants, several retail shops, and four hotels that account for over 300 rooms, or approximately 37% of the area’s available hotel beds. All these businesses would see their customers forced to utilize turnaround bulbs to gain access, adding volume and confusion to one of the most traveled sections of our community.

Aside from the added volume to an already congested intersection, this plan will have a direct negative effect on the neighboring residential areas. Should knowledgeable drivers turn left on US 321 (Blowing Rock Rd) instead of traveling through the US 321/NC 105 intersection, they will seek to gain access to NC 105 South by cutting through to Faculty Street via the Wells Fargo or McDonalds parking lots or traveling to Highland Drive and accessing Faculty Street.

The residential neighborhood that runs behind NC 105 South stands to gain a considerable amount of cut-through traffic as travelers look to circumnavigate a confusing section of roadway. This neighborhood stands as one of the oldest collections of single-family dwellings in the Town of Boone. This area is already a zero-tolerance zone related to speeding, due in part to the narrow roadways and residential density. The impediments planned on NC 105 will tempt travelers to access the neighborhood roadways to avoid delays, or simply “pop out,” in a location that is more convenient to their planned route.

It stands to reason the timing and scope of this project will be critical to business survival in this area of our county and in other parts of the region that use NC 105 as a connecting roadway. Our residents have a fresh, and mostly negative taste in their mouth regarding the lengthy construction delays that occurred on the US 321 project (R-2237C). Several businesses closed permanently during this project. In one instance, a 40-year old landmark restaurant was forced to take out a loan to help supplement their operating budget due to a lack of income during this long-lasting construction period.

The businesses impacted by U-5603 will certainly see periods of loss due to construction. In several cases, longstanding businesses already see they will be wiped away from their land completely. Boone and the High Country community feature a series of mountains and valleys. We do not have copious amounts of developable commercial property to house businesses relocated by this project. What assurances do we have that these businesses will indeed be made whole by the State as right-of-way acquisition commences? Land values in our community are a bit more complex in nature than in some other parts of North Carolina. There should be no

expense that a business owner should have to incur should their business and land be taken for this project.

NCDOT should also recognize this town thrives on visitor traffic. Assurances should be made that construction plans are overcommunicated and that funding is made available to create strategic marketing plans to ensure timely communication can be sent to the very visitors that help keep this town alive. Perhaps the most defining element of the Public Meeting held October 9<sup>th</sup> in Boone was the relative lack of clarity on these issues. These businesses are not just boxes on a map, they are investments that make our community what it is, and the livelihood of all who do business on and connected to the NC 105 corridor are counting on NCDOT to take that fact into consideration throughout this process.

## Our Unified Vision

Our continuous communication over the last several weeks led our group to identify some best-fit alternatives to this project. Our recommendations include:

- Merge projects U-5603, U-5705, and U-6403 into a more definable project, so the impact of all these synchronized actions can be measured in a clear manner.

With such complex development planned for a vital stretch of NC 105, the ability to lay all three of these actions into one combined project will help the public understand the full impact. It's especially important to show the relationship between U-5603 (Proposed NC 105 improvements) and U-5705 (US 321 / NC 105 intersection improvement) and show how the simultaneous timing of both projects will not lead to further negative impacts to travelers using NC 105 South.

- Provide design options other than the superstreet concept which reflect the character of Boone while protecting and improving access to the NC 105 business and residential areas. The goal of any improvement to NC 105 should provide support to this area as a business, resident, and visitor friendly corridor, while improving overall safety of motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists.

As we have worked on this project, no one who has communicated with us is in support of the superstreet concept. There has also been no one that feels safety and traffic flow are perfect and should not be discussed. We feel confident that a solution can be reached that addresses the function of the corridor while not having lasting negative impact on the business and residential elements that make this area unique.

- Establish a separated bike/pedestrian path on both sides of the roadway from the US 321/105 intersection to the NC 105 Bypass.

This enhancement will aid in the utilization of additional transportation modes in this congested area, especially near the large-scale student housing projects within this footprint. We advocate for separating the bike lanes from the roadway to ensure safety for all involved in the traffic

pattern. We also recommend adding crosswalks at key signalized intersections for bicycle and pedestrian traffic to safely cross NC 105, a feature not addressed on the maps shown at the public meeting.

- Enhance road width and ability to stack vehicles on each end of the NC 105 Bypass (on west end in conjunction with planned widening project on US 421). Allow vehicles to make a direct left turn (two lanes) from NC 105 Bypass on to NC 105 North (towards Boone).

As the NC 105 Bypass serves as the designated truck route for US 421, this change will allow numerous commercial use vehicles to safely and efficiently turn and travel toward Boone. The lack of truck stacking and congestion near the proposed bulb-out will keep cars and large trucks from navigating the proposed tight U-turn simultaneously.

- Work to reduce the footprint of the project to limit unnecessary impervious surfaces in the project area. Daylight the adjacent stream, when possible, to allow for better stormwater/flood water management throughout the corridor. Take advantage of the opportunity to adjust stormwater capacity and routing into adjacent waterways during this project.

The lack of variation in median size should allow for a more uniform pathway for NC 105 throughout this project area. That can provide a positive reduction in planned paved surface in an already flood-prone area. While under construction, NCDOT and the Town of Boone should work to safely enhance storm water drainage capacity, including rain gardens in medians (should medians be required), while working to provide a more efficient merge into existing streams and culverts.

- Establish a clear communication plan with local municipalities, businesses, residents, and other key stakeholders to pass information to interested parties and limit interruption and access issues during the construction period.

On a roadway that houses such important business and tourism assets, it's imperative that all interested parties work together to formulate a strategic communication plan. It's vital that every effort be made to keep the road open during the construction process and that lane closures are communicated well in advance. We suggest monies be set aside for a "Pardon our Dust," marketing campaign to aid businesses in providing up-to-date information about regional travel impacts. It is also essential to stage other projects in the region in a way as to not overwhelm one area with long-term traffic impediments on all major routes within proximity of the High Country.

In closing, this document does not pretend to serve as the represented comments and feelings of every business person, resident, and visitor that uses NC 105. What we can accurately state is that the nearly 80 members of our working group and the executive staff, Board of Directors, Boone Town Council, Watauga County Commissioners, State representatives, and numerous members of the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce do not feel that a superstreet is the appropriate solution for this challenging, yet vital economic district.

We urge officials to listen to the comments submitted by citizens and visitors in Watauga County and consider the appropriate recommendations listed in this document, and others like it that you have received. It is critical to take this feedback, combine the projects into one scope, and reconvene the local community for more involved and fully encompassing discussion.

Our community does not have a track record of receiving infrastructure improvements, such as this proposed project, very often. This project will shape the use of NC 105 and the scope of this important business district for decades to come.

While we may not be a group of traffic engineers, we can speak with experience regarding the behavior of traffic on this thoroughfare. Should the answer be that we all want to see NC 105 serve as the delivery vehicle to a thriving economic district, then we urge NCDOT leadership to engage our community in an appropriate time frame, so we can provide the input needed for this important project.

Thank you for your time in considering our stance. We look forward to working with all parties on a project that achieves the stated goals and allows the corridor to thrive.

Sincerely,

The Concerned Businesses and Residents of the NC 105 Corridor

