

NC54 Corridor Study Focus Group Summary

10/26/09

A series of focus group meetings were held with representatives of various community and interest groups on October 12 and 13, 2009, with a goal of identifying issues and concerns within the study corridor, to guide the development of initial planning materials that will be presented at a public workshop on November 18, 2009. Six groups were identified for the focus group process: commuters, businesses and developers, neighborhoods and environmental groups, policymakers, transit users/advocates, and bicycle/pedestrian advocates.

Some comments were recurring across different focus groups. For example, participants noted the intersection of NC 54 and Farrington Road as a traffic problem in several focus groups. Another common theme was the need for improved bicycle and pedestrian facilities and connections along NC 54 and improved local and regional transit service in the corridor. Opinions varied on the topic of development, with common participant comments including a desire for high-density development focused around transit stops and a focus on high-quality design and context-sensitivity. The location of the park-and-ride lots at the Friday Center was also noted as a contributing factor to congestion in the corridor in several focus groups—several participants recommended moving the park-and-ride lots closer to Interstate 40, and possibly providing direct access from the Interstate to the lots.

Commuters

Approximately 10-20 people attended the UNC Transportation Forum held on October 8, 2009, at the UNC Student Union. A table was set up in the exhibit/information area of the forum for people to provide comments on the NC 54 corridor study. One person commented that the existing park and ride lots on NC 54 were not adequately meeting demand for transportation between Durham and UNC, as they fill up very early in the morning. She recommended improving TTA bus service, especially in the US 15-501 corridor, to help reduce the park and ride lot demand. Another person was concerned by the mixture of bus and car traffic on NC 54 and asked that the study consider bus-only lanes as a potential improvement. A general comment was made that transportation plans in the area need to address issues such as sprawl and smart growth. Several people also commented on specific design concerns in the corridor, including the lane drops at Farrington and Barbee Chapel roads, the multiple short merge areas on the eastbound I-40 on-ramp, and the high number of signals along NC 54.

Businesses and Developers

Six people attended this focus group, representing businesses and developers in the study area. Attendees agreed that conditions at NC 54 and Farrington Road had improved with the recent changes made there, but felt that traffic within the overall NC 54 corridor was still a problem, especially in the afternoon peak period. One major concern was the location of the UNC park and ride lots at the Friday Center—several people commented that the location of these lots had a major impact on the amount of traffic in the corridor. There was also interest in the idea of HOV lanes, on both I-40 and NC 54, to encourage

carpooling, and in increased transit service in the corridor, including rail and bus. Several people commented that the area was not very conducive to walking and biking.

The focus group participants had varying opinions on the issue of land use and development. Some people were concerned about maintaining access to businesses along NC 54. Some thought higher-density, mixed use development, coupled with transit investments, could improve conditions in the corridor; others felt that high-density development would simply lead to more traffic. There was agreement that for higher-density development to work, investments in a strong mass transit system would be necessary. The group also agreed that there is demand in the area for senior-friendly development, but that there are currently barriers to this with regard to transit access in some areas and affordability of housing in some of the newer mixed use developments.

Neighborhood Groups and Environmental Advocates

The nine participants in this focus group discussed a wide variety of transportation and development topics. The intersection of NC 54 and Farrington Road was noted as a particular problem spot, especially for traffic trying to travel from I-40 to southbound Farrington. Stagecoach Road was noted as a popular alternate route that is also facing pressure from growing traffic. HOV and transit improvements were proposed by some participants as a way to reduce traffic congestion, but some other participants did not believe these measures would be effective. The location of the existing park and ride lots at the Friday Center was noted as a contributor to congestion on NC 54, and a suggestion was made to move these park and ride lots closer to I-40, perhaps with direct access from the Interstate.

The focus group participants also discussed traffic calming techniques as a way to discourage cut-through traffic in residential areas, with lengthy discussion of roundabouts in particular. Bicycle and pedestrian facilities were suggested along the full length of NC 54, as well as grade-separated crossings, to allow safe bicycle and pedestrian travel. In terms of land use and development, the primary concern noted in the focus group was of the importance of context-sensitive urban design.

Policymakers

Five policymakers from local governments and the University of North Carolina participated in this focus group. Discussion generally focused on the issues of development in the Leigh Farm/Southwest Durham Drive areas, UNC parking policies, and the planned light rail line through the NC 54 corridor. A large portion of the discussion focused on the Friday Center park-and-ride lots and the need for UNC to have parking available for employees, who often commute from far away locations, and for patients. The potential light rail line was envisioned as a possible way to transport more commuters between remote park-and-ride lots (preferably closer to Interstate 40 than the current lots, possibly with direct Interstate access) and the Hospital area.

When asked about their preferred outcomes from the study, participants noted the following items: a complete streets approach; viable, fundable recommendations; short-

and long-term recommendations (phased plan); education of the public on the importance of long-range planning; improved regional transit connections; and improved traffic flow.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Users/Advocates

This focus group, made up of eight participants with interests in bicycle and pedestrian transportation, discussed the need for off-road bicycle and pedestrian facilities in the NC 54 corridor, to connect points in Chapel Hill and Durham. In particular, a trail connection was discussed between the Meadowmont trail system and the proposed Third Fork Trail near Hope Valley Road, and sidewalks were suggested to connect the neighborhoods in Durham with the Friday Center area, allowing pedestrian access to the Chapel Hill bus system. In general, most participants felt that bicycle and pedestrian conditions on side streets within the neighborhoods are generally adequate. The interchanges at I-40 and US 15-501 were noted as particularly difficult areas for bicyclists and pedestrians to navigate.

Transit Users/Advocates

The transit focus group included eight participants representing transit agencies and advocacy groups. There was a general consensus regarding the need for improved transit service in the corridor, including better coordination between transit agencies in the area. Participants also stated that there needed to be a definitive decision made on the potential light rail line and station locations, to allow for clear decisions regarding the location of high-density development. Even with future light rail service, there was a recognition that there is a continued need for bus service in the corridor as well, both for local and regional trips. Improvements to bus stops and the sidewalk and bicycle networks were noted as important in efforts to improve bus access.

Additional Written Comments

Several people who were invited to attend focus group sessions but were unable to attend submitted written comments. The intersection of NC 54 and Farrington Road was noted by several people as a problem location, although it was also noted that conditions had improved since the changes were made at the I-40 interchange. Cut-through traffic on Huntingridge Road was also noted as a problem. Another person asked that bus service be provided to the area of Creekside Elementary School, as many transit-dependent families have trouble reaching the school.