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November 21, 2016

The Honorable Nick Tennyson
Secretary, North Carolina Department of Transportation
1501 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1501

Dear Secretary Tennyson,

I am writing on behalf of the **Don't Wreck Asheville Coalition** – a grassroots group of Asheville residents, businesses, and organizations that is now forming because we have become acutely concerned that the elected government of the City of Asheville has been and is failing to protect the interests of City residents in its planning work on the I-26 Connector project with your department. In saying this, we are not faulting NCDOT. In fact, the Coalition sympathizes with the difficulties NCDOT has had in dealing with the City of Asheville on the I-26 Connector project since it was originally conceived over a quarter of a century ago in 1988.¹ It can't be easy to negotiate highway design parameters with a group of residential and landscape architects, environmental activists, and city planners with no experience in highway design who have operated under the Holy Grail of removing everything but local traffic from Bowen Bridge.

While much work has gone into this project over the decades, at this juncture, the Coalition urges NCDOT to take a step back and re-examine the project from a rational and cost-effective perspective now that it appears to be poised for construction. Unfortunately, this project has a history of being bogged down in some alternative reality where decisions made decades ago are in control of a project that is set to be built a full five years from now.

A lot happens in the span of three decades. The Asheville of 2016 is radically different from the Asheville of years past when much of the City was blighted and in need of an economic shot in the arm that increased highway traffic was meant to bring. In 2016, the City of Asheville is the economic engine for Western North Carolina and the Coalition fears that building the 4B Alternative as now fashioned at the western front door to downtown Asheville will destroy the region's "golden goose" because it is so out of character with the mountain beauty of the City of Asheville. In addition, a decade of complex phased

¹ <http://mountainx.com/news/community-news/0716tennessee-php/>

construction of three new elevated bridges would have serious detrimental consequences on the very tourist traffic that produces significant tax revenue for both Asheville and North Carolina.

Unlike Mountain True, which has taken an inappropriate quasi- governmental role in being the lead driver on Alternative 4B, the **Don't Wreck Asheville Coalition** doesn't kid itself that AASHTO highway design standards and the minimization of the 4B Alternative footprint are in any way compatible goals. As such, we would like NCDOT planners to be frank with the City's representatives sooner rather than later on that fact and allow the NEPA process to move on in a reality-based fashion. In this way, NCDOT can begin to design the I-26 Connector's STIP I-2513B section in a manner that is in conformance with the State's highway needs and the French Broad River MPO's transportation planning objectives.

The Coalition recognizes that the primary problem with this project's design over the years has been the fantasy that removing everything but local traffic from Bowen Bridge can be accomplished without severe negative consequences. As an October 2016 survey done by the Montford Neighborhood Association shows, once people understand the irreversible consequences of that peripheral goal of the I-26 Connector project, they don't like the results. We have attached a copy of the survey results summary for the Department's review. In fact, it was that survey that led to the founding of the Coalition because it became apparent that Montford's concerns were shared by Asheville residents who live beyond the geographic boundaries of that one neighborhood.

In terms of designing an I-2513B section that makes sense for Asheville at this stage in its civic life, one should begin with an historic review of the ADT data provided on the NCDOT website. The chart on the next page shows that while traffic has increased on I-26, the current and projected traffic counts do not justify the massive scope of the current 4B plans.

If absolutely nothing is done, NCDOT's own projections show that traffic will increase less than 12% on the part of I-26 directly south of Patton Avenue between 2014 and 2033, while traffic north of Patton on I-26 will increase by less than 26% in that same 19-year time frame. And this is **IF** NCDOT's current projections actually hold true. As you likely know, there was a seminal 1997 paper that reviewed 210 large transportation projects from around the world (including the U.S.) and researchers determined that traffic projections are often inaccurate:

*"For half of all road projects the difference between actual and forecasted traffic is more than ± 20 percent. Forecasts have not become more accurate over the 30-year period studied. If techniques and skills for arriving at accurate demand forecasts have improved over time, as often claimed by forecasters, this does not show in the data."*²

² <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1303/1303.6654.pdf> or <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0967070X97000073>

**HISTORIC AVERAGE DAILY TRAFFIC COUNTS AT MAJOR ROADWAYS NEAR SECTION B
OF THE I-26 CONNECTOR PROJECT**

NCDOT DATA FOR TRAFFIC RUNNING IN BOTH DIRECTIONS COMBINED

<https://www.ncdot.gov/travel/statemapping/trafficvolumemaps/>

YEAR	LEICESTER HIGHWAY	PATTON AVE (WEST OF BOWEN BRIDGE)	I-26 DIRECTLY SOUTH OF BOWEN BRIDGE	BOWEN BRIDGE	I-26 DIRECTLY NORTH OF BOWEN BRIDGE	PATTON AVE (EAST OF BOWEN BRIDGE)	I-240
1998	34,000	50,000	49,000	92,000	45,000	6,600	65,000
2002	30,000	52,000	55,000	94,000	53,000	6,800	72,000
2004	27,000	44,000	55,000	96,000	56,000	7,000	72,000
2006	30,000	51,000	54,000	98,000	61,000	6,700	74,000
2007 BASELINE PER 2015 DEIS	Not Available	51,200	57,700	103,500*	62,000	14,400	78,100
2008	28,000	47,000	55,000	94,000	58,000	5,900	70,000
2010	28,000	52,000	56,000	97,000	61,000	5,900	74,000
2012	27,000	45,000	58,000	99,000	61,000	17,000	70,000
2014	29,000	47,000	63,000	102,000	64,000	15,000	77,000
16-YEAR CHANGE	-14.7%	-6%	+28.6%	+10.9%	+42.2%	+127.3%	+18.5%
2033 NO BUILD TRAFFIC PROJECTION FROM 2015 DEIS	Not Available	55,400	70,400	119,600	80,600	16,200	88,800
PROJECTED 35-YEAR CHANGE IF NOTHING IS BUILT	Not Available	+10.8%	+43.7%	+30%	+79.1%	+145.5%	36.6%
PROJECTED TRAFFIC INCREASES BETWEEN 2014 REALITY AND 2033 PROJECTIONS IF NOTHING IS BUILT	Not Available	+17.9%	+11.7%	+17.3%	+25.9%	+8%	+15.3%

* Note that the 2015 DEIS baseline 2007 ADT figures for Bowen Bridge traffic does not appear to be in sync with traffic count data for surrounding years per the NCDOT website of October 2016.

To the extent that traffic conditions and patterns need improvement through the I-26 Connector project, the Coalition suggests that NCDOT consider a far more cost-effective approach to designing I-2513B that has not been one of the alternatives ever considered – **augment** the existing I-26 section north of

Patton Avenue with another **four-lane** highway situated on the west side of the French Broad River that runs along the footprint that exists for the railroad right-of-way in that location. This new bypass section of I-26 would serve traffic not needing to stop in Asheville. Those new lanes could then access the existing I-26 by crossing the French Broad where the river bends near Woodfin north of Asheville. Traffic heading to and from the east would use the existing I-26 lanes to the east of the river, while the additional 4 lanes of new I-26 on the west bank would be reserved for traffic heading to and from the south and west sides of the City. NCDOT could then close off the current accident-inducing access to I-26 directly east of the Bowen Bridge to resolve that known and dangerous traffic configuration problem. The combined capacity of I-26 on both sides of the river would be eight lanes, so it would be much more than adequate to meet any future highway demands.

Building a simpler and smaller I-26 Connector project would have many benefits. First of all, it would save the state scarce transportation dollars that can then be used elsewhere in the French Broad River MPO area. The Strategic Mobility Formula that was instituted under Governor McCrory has worked to equalize transportation funding across the State. To the extent that a needlessly excessive investment of \$100-plus million is made on the I-26 Connector project to appease a group of people with no expertise in highway design, those dollars are wasted for the broader region and the state of North Carolina as a whole.

Second, the lengthy phased construction of the overall project – beginning with Section C construction in 2021, then followed by up to five years for constructing Section B beginning in 2024 means that Asheville’s I-26 and surrounding highways will be snarled for at least a decade. This will have a devastating impact on the tourist-based economy of Asheville because people will be loath to make a long weekend visit to Asheville when an unacceptable level of their leisure time is eaten up by sitting in highway construction traffic. This point is underscored by the Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau 2014 Tourism data³:

- *NC remained the top source of Asheville’s overnight leisure visitors, contributing 24% of travelers.*
- *Another 40% of visitors come from the Southeast Region, namely the States of South Carolina and Georgia.*

In addition to these concerns, the Coalition most fears the negative safety implications of the two proposed I-240 fly-overs, as they will be dangerous to visitors and residents of Asheville alike. According to a 2004 study by the national Transportation Research Board, approximately 25% of fatal crashes each year occur along horizontal curves. Additionally, the study states that “the average accident rate for horizontal curves is about three times the average accident rate for highway tangents.” In a nutshell, this means that the accident danger associated with the current I-26 routing north of the Bowen Bridge will just be replaced by creating an even more dangerous new configuration for I-240. This problem is made even more acute by the fact that the elevated highways will be used by many tourists who are unfamiliar with the area and a large population of retirees who relocate to Asheville.

Over the years, NCDOT has indulged Asheville’s lack of expertise in designing federal highways. It would be inexcusable, however, to move forward with the current 4B Alternative design, as it is not only a

³ <http://www.ashevillecvb.com/wp-content/uploads/2014-Asheville-Visitor-Profile-09212015.pdf>

significant waste of scarce transportation dollars, but it threatens the safety of the people who live in and visit the City of Asheville with a highway monstrosity that is completely out of proportion for a city of this size.

Secretary Tennyson, the ball is firmly in your court. Unless NCDOT levels with the elected leaders of Asheville on what is **NOT** possible when it comes to minimizing Alternative 4B, they will continue in their quixotic efforts in support of the unsupportable. This is a waste of the City's time and effort, as well as a waste of time and effort by NCDOT personnel. While the Coalition looks forward to having NCDOT take the lead on designing, engineering, and building a realistic highway that meets the needs of the State and the City of Asheville, it is prepared to take any and all action necessary to halt Alternative 4B if it proves necessary.

Coalition leaders would be more than happy to meet with NCDOT personnel to discuss the more cost-effective alternative we have briefly described in this letter at greater length. On behalf of the **Don't Wreck Asheville Coalition**, we look forward to hearing from you with some positive news on this matter.

Sincerely,

/S/ Richard H. Streeter

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Gary Jackson, Asheville City Manager
All Honorable Members of the Asheville City Council
Lyuba Zuyeva, Director, French Broad River MPO

MNA I-26 CONNECTOR SURVEY RESULTS

10-15-16

1. BROAD GEOGRAPHIC CROSS-SECTION REPRESENTED.

- 160 responses over 2 weeks from 9/30 through 10/12.
- Geographical results were broad with 57 different streets represented.
- 33 represented streets are in Montford.
- 133 responses were from Montford residents (83%).
- Remaining 24 streets represented the West Asheville, Linden-Murdock, North Asheville, Five Points, South Slope, River Arts, Emma Street, and Charlotte Street communities, as well as Woodfin and Fairview.

2. MINISCULE SUPPORT FOR I-26 PLANS.

- 3.75% (six people out of 160) support Alternative 4B.
- Only 15.63% think the City's goal of making 4B smaller can make that alternative okay.
- 48.75% think 4B is unacceptable.
- 20.63% think it would be difficult to make 4B acceptable even if the three elevated highways were smaller.

3. OVERALL, SURVEY RESPONDENTS CONSIDERED THEMSELVES KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT THE PROJECT.

- 77.22% of respondents are educated on the issue with 49.37% having followed the issue and aware of the alternatives, with an additional 27.85% knowing some impacts associated with 4B.
- 12.66% only knew 4B was the selected alternative.
- 10.13% were not familiar with the project.

4. THE LOCATION FOR THE I-26 CONNECTOR WASN'T SELECTED WHEN MOST SURVEY RESPONDENTS LIVED IN ASHEVILLE.

- When the location was selected in 1995, 27.50% (or less) of survey respondents were living in Asheville.
- 72.5% of survey respondents have no familiarity with the work of the Asheville Community Coordinating Committee that selected the I-26 location, as 37.5% of survey respondents moved to Asheville between 2000 and 2010, while another 35% moved here after 2010.

5. NCDOT HASN'T DONE A GOOD JOB OF EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE PROJECT.

- 61.88% did not attend any NCDOT forum about the project in 2015, and another 5% weren't sure.
- Only 35% of survey respondents attended the September 20 MNA forum with NCDOT officials.
- Of that 35% who attended the MNA forum, however, 94.64% said they learned something about the project that they did not know before then.

6. CONCERNS ABOUT THE I-26 CONNECTOR PROJECT AND/OR ALTERNATIVE 4B ARE BROAD.

- 86.88% are worried about increased noise.
- 84.38% are concerned about the visual impact on Asheville stemming from three elevated highways.
- 79.38% are concerned about the visuals associated with tall retaining and sound walls.
- 78.13% are concerned about increased air pollution – an issue that won't be analyzed by NCDOT because Asheville is not currently polluted.
- 76.88% are concerned about all the foliage/trees that will be clear-cut for construction.
- 74.38% are concerned about property values.
- 70% are concerned about structural integrity of homes and historic resources in Montford.
- Other representative stated concerns include:
 - *"This highway was not supported in any way by Asheville citizens. I attended the meeting in 2015 and it was clear as such. I am surprised none of the comments expressed at the meeting were even taken into consideration. It is clear to me that NCDOT does not have the best interest in protecting and accommodating Asheville citizens. Very disappointing."*
 - *"A highway too large for a city of our size and needs. Cutting off/isolating West Asheville from Asheville. Increased crime in areas blighted by this project. A decade or more of construction that makes entering/exiting Asheville from/to the west very difficult and the likely need to use a less desirable southern I-40 entry/exit approach instead. For reference, a similar but much smaller in comparison is the current I-26 bridge construction - the duration of that construction and the traffic congestion that it causes."*
 - *"The sheer scale of the project seems very much out of synch with Asheville. This looks like Spaghetti Junction in Atlanta!"*
 - *"4B is based on a mistaken vision of the Jeff Bowen bridge as potentially part of an urban boulevard connecting west Asheville with downtown. This idea ignores the fact that Patton is a US highway and likely to remain car centered."*
 - *"Having lived in major metropolitan areas (Detroit, San Francisco, Atlanta) this size project for this city is absurd. There is no need nor will there be in 20+ years for this level of construction to move traffic that does not exist. Also to take this through a historical area is unacceptable so rethink not only scale but area. Asheville does not need a spaghetti junction now found in major metropolitan city with 8+million residents. We will never be that nor will we ever need this size of road system."*
 - *"Montford has a strong historic identity. it is a tourist draw, as is downtown Asheville. tourists do NOT want to see big highways when they stay in downtown hotels, when sitting at downtown restaurants, or touring Montford, or Biltmore house, THEY WANT TO SEE AND TOUCH THE PAST. If they wanted a big cosmopolitan town, they would go to Atlanta or Charlotte, not here. THEY COME HERE FOR THE NATURAL BEAUTY. THEY BUY PROPERTY HERE BECAUSE OF THE NATURAL BEAUTY."*
 - *"Over the past 20 years, I have waited no more than 5 minutes in any "traffic jam" in Asheville proper. The construction will impact our beautiful green space. The noise and air pollution will have lasting effects on the region, people and wildlife. All City and surrounding residents should be concerned with these factors and if strategic and reasonable thinking and decisions went into this plan."*

- *“DOT could not explain/quantify the “benefits” of this project which originated back in 1989. They spent most of the time explaining how they’ve followed “the process.”*

7. MOST SURVEY RESPONDENTS DON’T EXPERIENCE THE CONGESTION THAT SUGGESTS THE NEED FOR REMOVING ALL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC OFF THE BOWEN BRIDGE.

- Only 21.6% of survey respondents experience daily traffic congestion in the area.
- 53.49% of respondents claim traffic congestion on and approaching the Bowen Bridge occurs in their travels, once or twice a month, rarely, or never.
- Another 24.84% experience congestion in the area once or twice a week.

8. REGARDLESS OF THE CITY’S HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS, FEW PEOPLE WILL WALK OR BIKE ALONG THE BOWEN BRIDGE.

- Only 1.89% would use it for these purposes daily, while another 13.21% would walk or bike it weekly.
- 78.61% would rarely (33.96%) or never (44.65%) bike or walk it, suggesting any use of City or State tax dollars to fund such access would be wasted.
- *“Ummm walking across a bridge is nice when you can see a river -- not when you're looking at a spaghetti mess of bridges.”*

9. TWO-THIRDS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS WANT ASHEVILLE COMMUNITIES TO UNITE TO FIGHT THE I-26 PLANS.

- Only 6.88% of survey respondents believe the MNA should support 4B.
- Another 16.25% want the MNA to oppose 4B.
- A full 63.75% believe the MNA should work with other Asheville communities to *“reevaluate alternatives that were discarded in 1995 that located the entire I-26 project – Sections A, B, and C – west of the City limits.”*
- Twenty-eight survey respondents volunteered to help with the fight and provided their contact information.
- 2.5% believe it would be best for the MNA to take no position on the I-26 Connector Project.
- *“The project needs to go back to the drawing board and explore true solutions to running an interstate through the middle of a city (potentially just to connect a sea port to an inland port).”*
- *“Work with the city and NCDOT to look at alternatives both existing and new, to preserve the visual beauty of the area and to keep neighborhoods connected and have the least impact on trees and existing natural areas.”*
- *“I don't think more people with a low education actually understand the magnitude of the construction. This is something that happened in the River Arts District where unnecessary money is being used to fix up roads that no one walks on. And just because a company from another state wants to build a road that no one wants, City Council should agree with the citizens of the neighborhood, who live and work in the area.”*
- *“The effect on the character of Asheville will be similar to what might have been created if the proposed downtown mall had been developed in the late 70s. Devastating.”*
- *“This highway project will absolutely ruin our city and its absurd that we are spending so much time and money planning it. This is the worst idea Asheville has faced since we decided against building the*

huge mall downtown. Can you imagine how terrible downtown would be now if that project had gone through? This highway will ruin our town.”

- *“I absolutely believe that routing I-26 through the city of Asheville is of no benefit to the people of the city. The existing highway is more than sufficient if the thru-traffic were routed around the city, as is done in many other cities throughout the country.”*
- *I have lived here since 1992 and EVERYTHING has changed. in 1995, DOWNTOWN WAS DEAD. Now downtown is a main tourist draw and source of income for the city. DOT needs to realize that.*

10. PEOPLE UNDERSTAND A CITY-WIDE FIGHT APPROACH WILL BE AN UPHILL BATTLE.

- *“If you do not take the lead, the City will do nothing to help or change. They take the path of least resistance, and do the least amount of work. The neighborhoods have to do this themselves.*
- *I recently attended a meeting where vice mayor Gwen Wisler was present and had an opportunity to talk with her. She was very forthcoming and indicated, despite NCDOT's comment about the 4B alternative not being set in stone, the likelihood of moving the highway to the west side of the river is pretty much nil. I don't think MNA should throw in the towel but know that it will be a very, very uphill battle that may result in no significant changes.”*