



April 20, 2017

The Honorable Esther Manheimer
Mayor, City of Asheville
70 Court Plaza
P.O. Box 7148
Asheville, NC 28802

VIA E-MAIL

Dear Mayor Manheimer;

Since last summer when members of the Montford Neighborhood Association met with you to share numerous concerns about the I-26 Connector Project's Alternative 4B, we have found you to be a direct and capable leader, willing to be further educated about this project and its ramifications for the City of Asheville. However, based on Council Member Julie Mayfield's presentation Tuesday night to the Montford Neighborhood Association, it appears that the City's stance is to continue to support this disastrous project in the face of inadequate and misleading data, grave concerns about the impact on Asheville's businesses and tourism industry, and significant opposition by citizens of Asheville.

Council Member Mayfield voiced her hope that Alternative 4B can be improved, downsized, and made acceptable. **It can't.** Even if minor modifications can be made, it will be "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic." Highway standards will dictate the size and width of the lanes, shoulders, and merges, and redirecting I-240 traffic off the Bowen Bridge onto dangerously curved elevated flyovers will not only impact public safety, but mean additional years of construction and permanent damage to adjoining neighborhoods and the entire city's view shed. The livability of the City will be permanently impaired, and the impact on Asheville's tourism industry will be devastating. Just the loss of river frontage – a prime jewel of any tourist and retirement destination – is immeasurable. Making matters worse, 4B will do nothing to alleviate the regional traffic congestion issues that are caused more directly by inadequate local roadway designs that can be cured by small focused transportation improvement projects.

Council Member Mayfield also said on Tuesday that there is no “political will” to back away from Alternative 4B and support another design, even if it is less expensive, quicker to construct and more in scale with a city the size of Asheville. Ms. Mayfield voiced concern that rejecting 4B now will cost the City credibility, and possibly jeopardize our “seat at the table” with NCDOT. And yet, that is a risk our local government must take! Please keep in mind though that any initial consternation at NCDOT by Asheville’s change of mind will be more than offset by the \$100-plus million in scarce transportation dollars that can be directed to other needed transportation projects in the region.

While it’s true that the City persuaded NCDOT to select 4B as the preferred alternative based on well-intentioned objectives for Patton Avenue, this was done naively, and without the full facts or the expertise to understand the consequences. And, again, these unintended consequences are just too disastrous. If presented with accurate representations of the 4B trade-offs, the residents of this City and the businesses will reject, even rebel, at this plan. On behalf of your constituents, the people of Asheville, we urge you and the City Council to correct this situation before it’s too late. **The City must summon up the political courage to do what is in the best interests of its citizens, and its future.**

There is a path forward that preserves the City of Asheville’s position as a critical decision-maker while also allowing for other alternatives (beyond 4B) to be considered. The City is prepared to invest to get the information it rightfully needs to inform their actions and has appropriated \$200,000 toward this end – but it must be spent on a multi-disciplinary consulting firm with civil engineering expertise and sufficient experience in the NEPA process for large highway projects – not a firm with simple project management credentials. With the right data, better options will be clear, and the City will emphatically say “no!” to the unacceptable consequences of 4B. But, we must act now.

In closing, we make the following requests to the City of Asheville:

1. Reach out to Governor Cooper and officially ask that the project planning for Section B of the I-26 Connector project be placed on hiatus until a firm with NEPA and highway engineering expertise can be retained to evaluate the NCDOT NEPA analysis and Ms. Mayfield’s assumptions about the goal of downsizing the project in light of federal highway design standards and constraints. We think it’s critically important that the City state to Governor Cooper that it will not be able to continue supporting 4B if highway engineering experts indicate that minimization of the elevated highways and fly-overs is not possible.
2. Because Council Member Mayfield indicated that the City of Asheville is in control of the situation and has commitments from NCDOT on various issues ranging from land release on Patton Avenue, to project contracting, we ask for the written documents that back up those claims so they can be shared with the public.
3. In a November 28, 2016 letter to you, we had asked that *“The City supply to the Coalition copies of all written and electronic communications from January 1, 2014 to the present time about the I-26 Connector project between current/former Council members; current/former Council*

members and City staff; and, City of Asheville employees' and current/previous officials' communications between or among NCDOT and its consultants, as well as the Land of Sky French Broad River MPO." We subsequently received a letter from City Manager Gary Jackson stating this would be treated like a normal FOIA request. Nearly five months later, we are still awaiting any materials responsive to that request and therefore, must reiterate it.

The Don't Wreck Asheville Coalition will not let this issue go. It's just too important – the future of the City of Asheville is at stake. We will continue to work diligently to grow our grassroots movement in the months and years ahead because it is the right thing to do for the City of Asheville. Tuesday night's meeting was before a packed room with an audience 100% against the project -- a bellwether moment indicating a changing and mounting tide. It is our hope to work collaboratively with you and your colleagues on the City Council on the I-26 Connector project, but if that is not possible, we will continue to raise our voices, expand our coalition, and escalate our protests.

Thank you for your attention to our requests. We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest opportunity.

Best Regards,

The Don't Wreck Asheville Coalition Steering Committee:

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Cc:

Members of the Asheville City Council

Gary Jackson