

Project History

The I-26 Connector in Buncombe County was first included in the NCDOT's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) in 1989. From 1989 to 1995, the I-26 Connector was studied as part of the Asheville Urban Area Corridor Preservation Pilot Project. This was the study to develop the Asheville Urban Area Thoroughfare Plan, a long-range regional transportation plan. From 1995 to the present, NCDOT's Project Development and Environmental Analysis Branch (PDEA) has conducted more detailed studies for the I-26 Connector. In 1989, as part of the Asheville Urban Area Corridor Preservation Pilot Project, the Asheville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) held a series of workshops to identify overall transportation goals and specific projects in the Asheville area, including the I-26 Connector. The Coalition of Asheville Neighborhoods (CAN) held 15 informational meetings throughout the urban area to identify potential corridors for the I-26 Connector. The Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) developed the Asheville Urban Area Transportation System Goals and Objectives in 1991 and formed the Asheville Connector Advisory Committee (ACAC) to study I-26 Connector alternatives. This group had representatives from 17 neighborhood, environmental and business groups. NCDOT completed and distributed a draft Phase I Environmental Analysis for the connector to the MPO and the ACAC in early 1993. This document included data collected from environmental and design studies, and public and environmental agency involvement. In September 1993, the ACAC presented their recommendations to the MPO which included a preferred corridor location for the proposed route. Four public workshops were held to discuss the connector and other local thoroughfare plan recommendations in late 1993. In June 1994, two more public workshops were held to discuss the connector and the plan. Then, two public hearings were held in June and July 1994 to provide the public another opportunity to officially comment on the project. In April 1995, NCDOT published the final Phase I Environmental Analysis for the Asheville Urban Area. This publication contained signatures and resolutions concurring on numerous issues including a preferred corridor for the I-26 Connector. Those approving the recommendations in this analysis included the City of Asheville, the Towns of Biltmore Forest, Black Mountain, Fletcher, Montreat, Weaverville, and Woodfin, the Buncombe County Commissioners, the US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Department of Interior, the NC Wildlife Resources Commission and the NC Department of Cultural Resources. The principal reasons cited for the selection of the preferred corridor by the study committees and the local officials in the 1995 analysis include:

- The corridor will provide the most direct route reducing vehicle miles traveled.
- The corridor will not promote urban sprawl like the various bypass routes.
- The corridor will reduce the congestion on the existing Smoky Park Bridges.
- The corridor will cause less damage to the existing development and the natural environment in the Asheville area than any of the alternative routes suggested by the public and local officials throughout the public involvement process.

In late 1995, NCDOT contracted with a private consulting firm to develop conceptual engineering plans and begin environmental studies for the proposed I-26 Connector. After two years of studies, three alternatives (Alternatives 1, 2 & 3) were selected for detailed engineering and environmental analyses within the proposed corridor to connect I-240 to US 19-23-70. Existing land use, cultural and natural resources were inventoried. Traffic noise and capacity analyses were conducted. Relocation impacts were determined and cost estimates developed. After these extensive engineering and environmental studies, Alternative 1 was eliminated from further consideration.

Since 1997, NCDOT has held meetings with the general public, community leaders, local interest groups, business groups and the affected businesses and neighborhoods to explain the proposed project. These meetings have resulted in numerous modifications to make this project more desirable to the City and residents.

NCDOT has added two new project alternatives, Alternatives 4 and 5, to the new location portion of the project north of Patton Avenue. These alternatives separate Patton Avenue and I-240 traffic across the French Broad River with new river crossings and improvements along I-240 and Patton Avenue immediately east of the river.

NCDOT also proposes to improve the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange in southwest Asheville as part of the I-26 Connector project. During the public design forum, many local citizens requested that the department provide the missing interstate connections between the future I-26 and I-40. Currently, there are no direct connections for vehicles traveling south on I-240 to I-40 East and for those traveling west on I-40 to north on I-240. Improvements to the interchange will add these connections as well as relieve existing congestion and improve safety through this area. In June 2004, NCDOT conducted an open-house Citizens Informational Workshop at the National Guard Armory in Asheville to present alternatives for the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange improvements that were added as part of the I-26 Connector project.

In July 2002, the French Broad River Municipal Planning Organization (MPO) endorsed NCDOT's recommendation for 8-lanes along the existing I-240 section of the project to adequately accommodate traffic demands along this route. After a new traffic forecast was developed, several studies were conducted to confirm the 8-lane recommendation. In 2004, NCDOT conducted a Citizen's Informational Forum at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College in Asheville to explain to the community the information that is the basis of NCDOT's recommendation to provide eight through lanes for traffic along the I-240 segment of the I-26 Connector project in West Asheville.

In June 2004, the City of Asheville formed a local project aesthetics advisory committee to suggest appearance details to allow the project to reflect the character of the community. NCDOT has worked with this committee and their recommendations have resulted a proposed design revision to provide a planted median barrier along the portion of I-240 that will be improved with this project. The Aesthetics Committee has also developed recommendations for the appearance of the proposed noise walls along the project.

In October 2006, NCDOT conducted a Citizen's Informational Workshop in Asheville to display the revised designs, answer questions and receive comments about the entire I-26 Connector project. At this workshop, the Aesthetics Committee gathered public input for their appearance recommendations and the Asheville Design Center (ADC) presented a new conceptual alignment for the northern new location portion of the project. After an initial NCDOT review of the ADC concept, NCDOT representatives met with ADC representatives in March 2007 to discuss their review with ADC officials. NCDOT then conducted further engineering before presenting their findings and a recommendation for no further evaluation of the ADC conceptual alignment to the Asheville City Council in June 2007. Subsequently, the City of Asheville has approved funding to further evaluate the ADC proposal.

In July 2007, NCDOT conducted five informal neighborhood meetings for the Burton Street neighborhood, the Bingham Road area, the West End neighborhood, the Hillcrest neighborhood and the Westwood Place neighborhood to have additional opportunity to review and comment on the proposed project alternatives.

In August 2007, NCDOT eliminated further consideration of Alternate 5 that proposed constructing a new crossing of the French Broad River immediately south of the existing Smoky Park Bridges to accommodate Patton Avenue traffic. This alternative was eliminated due to operational deficiencies that would worsen the traffic operations along existing I-240 east of the project in downtown Asheville.

The project is listed in the Transportation Improvement Program for right-of-way acquisition to begin in Fiscal Year 2008 and construction to begin in Fiscal Year 2009.

Complete Draft Environmental Impact Statement	<i>Winter 2007</i>
Conduct Public Hearing	<i>Winter 2007/2008</i>
Select Preferred Alternative	<i>Spring 2008</i>
Complete Final Environmental Impact Statement	<i>Fall 2008</i>