



I-26 Connector

STIP Project No. I-2513



I-26 Asheville Connector from I-40 to US 19-23-70 north of Asheville in Buncombe County, North Carolina

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE I-26 ASHEVILLE CONNECTOR

I-26 Connector Project Overview

The I-26 Connector project is an interstate freeway project that would connect I-26 in southwestern Asheville to US 19-23-70 in northwest Asheville and have a total length of approximately 7 miles. The I-26 Connector would extend I-26 from I-40 to US 19-23-70 and would allow for the eventual designation of I-26 from Charleston, South Carolina, to Johnson City, Tennessee, once a remaining section from the north end of this project to Mars Hill, North Carolina, is completed. The I-26 Connector would upgrade and widen I-240 from I-40 to Patton Avenue and then cross the French Broad River as a new freeway to US 19-23-70 slightly south of the Broadway interchange.

The project is broken into four sections. The Selected Alternative for the I-26 Connector Project includes Section C – Alternative F-1, Section A – Widening Alternative, and Section B – Alternative 4-B. The 2020-2029 NCDOT STIP divides the project into four sections, separating the portion of Section B that includes improvements to Riverside Drive from Hill Street to Broadway Street as Section D.

Features of Section C - Alternative F-1 include:

- Maintaining the existing I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange configuration and adding a loop and a ramp to provide for the missing movements.
- Reconstruction of I-40/US 19-23-74A (Smoky Park Highway) interchange, except Ramp A utilizing existing configuration, but realigning ramps on the north of I-40.
- I-40/NC 191 (Brevard Road) interchange maintains existing configuration.
- Full access to NC 191 (Brevard Road) along I-40 eastbound and westbound for traffic coming to and from I-26 and I-240.

Features of Section A – I-240 Widening Alternative include:

- Construct Ramp A at US 19/23 (Smokey Park Highway).
- Improve I-40 between the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange and US 19/23 (Smokey Park Highway).
- Reconstruct the I-26/I-240 and NC 191 (Brevard Road) interchange to a diamond interchange that eliminates I-26 eastbound/I-240 westbound exit to NC 191 (Brevard Road).
- Upgrade the existing I-26/I-240 and SR 3556 (Amboy Road) interchange to a full interchange with a conventional diamond configuration.
- Extend SR 3556 (Amboy Road) over I-26/I-240 and continue parallel with I-26/I-240 to the existing intersection of NC 191 (Brevard Road).

Features of Section B - Alternative 4-B include:

- Upgrade the existing I-26/I-240 and US 19-23 Business (Haywood Road) interchange to a tight urban diamond interchange (TUDI) configuration.
- Upgrading the existing I-240 interchange with US 19-23-74A (Patton Avenue) to accommodate the connection for the new location portion of I-26.
- Crosses over the Crowne Plaza Resort golf course.
- Creates three new crossings over the French Broad River, to the north of the existing Captain Jeff Bowen Bridges. Two bridges would carry I-240 traffic, with the third carrying I-26.
- Separates I-240 traffic from Patton Avenue traffic across the Captain Jeff Bowen Bridges and includes construction on I-240 east of the French Broad River.

Features of Section D – Riverside Drive

- Upgrades to include one 11-foot lane in each direction, one five-foot bicycle lane in each direction, and a 10-foot multi-use path on the west side of the roadway.
- Construct a buffer to the bicycle lane and add a concrete sidewalk to the east side of Riverside Drive, between the US 19/23 southbound retaining wall.

The project is needed to address traffic capacity problems along the existing I-240 corridor (future I-26), across the Captain Jeff Bowen Bridges to US 19-23-70. Presently numerous areas do not meet interstate design standards and cannot be designated I-26 without being improved. The project would improve traffic flow, address substandard roadway features, and provide an interstate roadway through West Asheville for the I-26 Corridor. All sections are to be let in FY 2020.

As part of STIP Project I-2513, the project creates three new crossings over the French Broad River, to the north of the existing Captain Jeff Bowen Bridges (Section B). Construction of the spans is expected to provide a “safe passage lane” for river users to use during construction. Construction activities that require work to be done from the top of the bridge, such as setting girders, are expected to occur at night.

This Communications Plan for the construction of the I-26 Connector is intended to supplement the Public Involvement Plan (2017) and communications already in place for STIP Project I-2513. This plan focuses on specific activities to alert river users to the hazards of bridge construction and is not intended to be a comprehensive plan for the entire I-26 Connector project.

Goals of the Strategic Communications Plan

- Implement a diversified communication and outreach strategy in coordination with the City of Asheville, Buncombe County, N.C. Department of Parks and Recreation, RiverLink and other stakeholders that will relay the purpose of the I-26 Connector project as an integral part of the project. It will help ensure that river users and businesses dependent on the river understand the river will be open during construction with an area of safe passage for river users.
- Identify stakeholders using or benefiting from the French Broad River and understand their unique needs and concerns regarding river use during construction/demolition of the I-26 Connector.
- Inform citizens of NCDOT’s efforts to avoid and minimize disruptions to the river during construction/demolition.
- Provide thorough, up-to-date information regarding project progress and milestones throughout the life of the project.
- Provide information regarding river conditions at the I-26 Connector and any events that may cause a closure (e.g. flooding, overhead construction).
- Provide safety messaging similar to Work Zone Safety campaigns during construction.

- Remind I-26 and I-240 motorists of the purpose, need and benefits of the project.
- Use various social media platforms to engage the community in two-way dialogue regarding the project’s impacts, benefits and progress.
- Encourage river users to “know before you go” with Twitter, Facebook, TIMS, 511, etc.

Targeted Audiences

Targeted audiences may include, but are not limited to the following:

Motorists

Tourists

Medical Facilities

Property owners along the River

Biltmore Estate

River users including:

Individual paddlers

Paddling groups

Paddling/Tubing/Fly fishing businesses

River outfitters

Government officials:

Asheville City Council

Buncombe County Commissioners

Buncombe County Parks and Recreation

I-26 Connector Working Group

Government officials (continued):

Land of Sky

NC Department of Parks and Recreation
(NCDPR)

NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC)

Other civic groups:

RiverLink

MountainTrue

Asheville Greenworks

Clean Water for NC

Trout Unlimited

Sierra Club – WNC Chapter

Implementation Strategies and Tactics

- Develop a construction safety plan for river users that includes signage and river markers to alert river users to the safe passage lane.
- Identify specific stakeholders and partner with RiverLink in contacting the parties.
- Provide opportunities for small group meetings with identified stakeholders. The meetings will include a brief, targeted presentation tailored to the NCDOT identified concerns of the group and provide an opportunity for questions and answers.
- Update and maintain the comprehensive project website, <https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/asheville-i-26-connector>
- Issue news releases as needed, regarding project schedule, progress, impacts, and milestones.
- Provide a station regarding bridge construction at the Design Public Meeting to be held in November 2018. Include river businesses and property owners along the river in the mailing list.
- Place notification signs at public input locations upstream of the I-26 Connector through Buncombe County. Coordinate with NCWRC (<http://www.ncwildlife.org/Boating/Where-to-Boat>) and NCDPR to update their information.
- Provide notification information to identified stakeholders.
- Continue to coordinate with RiverLink. A meeting was held with the group in November, 2018 which helped identify communication channels. Ongoing coordination may take place to update river users of the river status.
- Coordinate strategic social media campaigns.
 - Use an established Twitter feed for the project to keep the public informed of project progress, construction activities and project-related events. The tweets will consist of specific information about the project, information about alternative routes, photos and videos of crews working efficiently, and any good news about the project. This effort will also include updates to river users regarding current and anticipated conditions on the rivers.

- Collaborate with project field personnel to document the progress of the project by posting photos to the department's Instagram, Pinterest and Flickr accounts. Links to the photos will be posted on Twitter, Facebook and used in news releases.
- It is the responsibility of the NCDOT Division 13 project engineer office in charge of the project to update the Transportation Information Management System of all parts of the project that will affect motorists, such as a lane or road closures, temporary detours, etc. as they come up on the project schedule. Once posted on the NCDOT website in the Traveler Information section (where it remains until that closure or detour is over), and automatically generates a feed for the NCDOT Twitter account that covers this area of the state, as well as for our 511 travel phone system.
- The project engineer office also has the responsibility of informing the NCDOT public relations officer of updates. The communications officer and the project engineer office decide whether they justify a news release. If it isn't something that would be sent as a full news release, the communications office or project engineer can send a brief email note to local recipients or post to social media each of these updates.
- It is also possible to arrange for the project engineer to send a weekly briefing to the public relations officer and local recipients — if project parameters are going to change week to week — with a look ahead of what is planned the following week, so the information can be distributed on a more local level than we are capable of doing through our traditional news release distribution system.
- All these steps are flexible and can be adjusted to the requirements of the construction.

River User Safety Plan

Because the French Broad River, Hominy Creek, and Smith Mill Creek are regularly used for recreation, they cannot be closed for the life of construction. NCDOT shall commit to providing a safe passage lane for users of the French Broad River, Hominy Creek, and Smith Mill Creek. To do so, NCDOT shall employ safety measures, including catchment devices on overhead structures to prevent material from falling on river users. In addition, floating navigational aids will be used to guide river users to the safe passage lane and away from the causeways/construction zone. For new bridges, most work is expected to take place during the day. NCDOT will work with river users, businesses, and recreational river and civic groups to insure public notification of the temporary closures.

The safe passage lane for river users will be located in a portion of the river away from the causeways for the majority of the life of the project. NCDOT shall use a floating navigational aid to guide river users to the safe passage lane.

NCDOT shall commit to including a netting containment system on the overhead structures to prevent material from falling on river or greenway users, or in the water. NCDOT shall place steady-state red lights that are solar-powered on the causeway to alert river users to its location. Generators will not be used to provide power. These lights will be atop permanent structures, such as a pole, on each causeway for the duration of the project. The contractor will be responsible for maintaining these lights at all times during construction, replacing them as necessary.

It is expected that there will be times when the river, creeks or greenways must be closed for the safety of recreational users due to the type of work being done (e.g. setting girders, removal of bent caps). These closures are not expected to last more than two days and are expected to occur predominantly at night. Care will be taken to not close the waterways or greenways during known peak user times, particularly the Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day weekends.

NCDOT will develop a Communication Plan for the Construction of the I-26 Connector Bridges. This plan focuses on specific activities to alert recreational users to the hazards of bridge construction and will be appended to larger communication plan for the entire I-26 project.

Communication Channels

- Television stations — WLOS (ABC), WYFF (NBC), WMYA, WSPA (CBS), WYCW (CW), WHNS (FOX), WETP (PBS), WUNE (PBS)
- FM Radio Stations — Asheville: WCQS, WLFA, WOXL, WKSF, WTMT, WRES, WMYI, WSFM, WPVM, and WMIT ; Biltmore Forest: WOXL
- Newspapers — Asheville Citizen-Times, Mountain Xpress, and Biltmore Beacon
- Websites, blogs
- City government offices
- Libraries
- Local businesses
- West Asheville Business Association
- I-26 Connector Working Group

Required Resources

Public Relations Officer Employed by NCDOT, managed by the Communications Office, and located in the Division 13 Office in Asheville

- Community-based, on-the-ground local marketing and communications specialist
- Responsible for development, coordination and integration of communications including local social media efforts and traditional media marketing
- Partners with local media to promote awareness and ensure project understanding

Timeline for Implementation

Fall 2018-Initiate Stakeholder Outreach

- The project team will continue to work with RiverLink, as done (or currently planned) on the I-4400/I-4700 project, to coordinate with the users. At the meeting the project team will give a short presentation summarizing the project and the safety plan for river users during the construction of bridges over the French Broad River.
- Hold Small Group Stakeholder Meetings: After identifying prominent businesses and other stakeholders that rely on access to the river, the project team will plan up to two meetings to gather input from stakeholders about the use of the river and how construction around the river will affect their operations. The project team plans to coordinate with stakeholder groups as well as locally distribute invites to the meetings. The project team attended meeting with RiverLink (11/14/2018) to identify and discuss the river user methods and common practices. This meeting was to gather input from the public and other river users.

November 2018-Held Design Public Hearing and included station to address French Broad River bridge construction concerns

February 2020- Final Environmental Impact Statement approved

May 2023-Record of Decision approved

2024 – Design-Build Let

Now through project construction-Regularly update stakeholders and public regarding progress, conditions of the river, etc.