



## **I-26 Connector Project History**

### **1989 to 1995**

**1989** The I-26 Connector in Buncombe County was first included in the NCDOT's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) as project I-2513. 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.

**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.

**1991** 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. That document included data collected from environmental and design studies, and public and environmental agency involvement.

**1993** The ACAC presented their recommendations to the MPO in September 1993. Their recommendations 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.

**1994** Two more public workshops were held in early 1994 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.

**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 included:

- 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.

## **1995 to 1996**

NCDOT's Project Development and Environmental Analysis Branch (PDEA) conducted more detailed studies for the I-26 Connector.

**Fall 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 extensive engineering and environmental studies, Alternative 1 was eliminated from further consideration.

## **1997 – 2004**

**1997** NCDOT 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 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 NCDOT 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.

**2004** The City of Asheville formed a local project aesthetics advisory committee in June, 2004, 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 in 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.

**2006** NCDOT conducted a Citizen's Informational Workshop in Asheville in October 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. NCDOT conducted an initial review of the ADC concept.

**2007** 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. Subsequently, the City of Asheville approved funding to further evaluate the ADC proposal. In July, 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, 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.

**2008** NCDOT released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) in March 2008.

**2009** During the course of the DEIS review, the project Merger Team unanimously agreed to remove Alternative 2 for section B of the project on December 15, 2009, due to operational problems that appeared when the updated traffic forecast was prepared.

**2009-2010** A new DEIS was being prepared to include the 4B alternative. Alternative 4B, a version of Alternative 4 that was requested for inclusion by the Asheville Design Center and the City of Asheville, was presented at the Public Hearing the 2008 DEIS and was officially added as a project alternative at the same December 15, 2009, merger meeting.

**2010** A new priority rating system was implemented by NCDOT. The new ranking of the I-26 Connector Project was much lower than its previous ranking and work was halted. In the fall of 2011, Governor Bev Perdue announced a plan to accelerate Urban Loop projects around the state, including the I-26 project, using different funding options. After the results of this new priority ranking system, the DEIS was put on hold.

**2012** Project development studies for I-26 Connector were re-initiated in spring 2012 even though funding is not yet available. Since 2012, project alternatives in Section “B” (the new location portion north of Patton Avenue, across the French Broad River) have been modified to avoid impacts to the Emma Road community and to identify multimodal connectivity between west Asheville and Asheville. A new alternative, Alternative 3C, has been developed, to further reduce impacts to the natural and human environments and is similar to Alternative 3, but with a smaller footprint and connecting to US 19/23 further south of the Alternative 3 connection.

**2014** Preliminary designs for Alternative 3C were completed in April 2014.

All “B” section alternatives (3, 3C, 4, and 4B) were modified to better accommodate and facilitate pedestrian and bicycle access, as well as avoid impacts to the Emma Road community. Additional improvements to all alternatives have been completed to better accommodate future traffic demands while trying to further avoid or minimize impacts to the community.

**2015** The Merger Team officially added Alternative 3C as a Detailed Study Alternative to be added to the DEIS. Based on the updated designs, environmental and engineering studies were revised to evaluate the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of each alternative. These studies were then used to prepare the 2015 DEIS.

**Future Activities** The 2015 DEIS and public hearing maps will be available for public and agency review and comment. A pre-hearing open house will then be held to answer questions and receive comments on the project. Following the open house a formal public hearing will be held, which will include a review of the project followed by a public comment session. The schedule below details the upcoming major milestones for the project.

<b>Conduct Public Hearing</b>	November 2015
<b>Select Preferred Alternative</b>	Winter 2015/2016
<b>Complete Final Environmental Impact Statement</b>	Fall 2016
<b>Begin Right of Way Acquisition (Section C)</b>	2019
<b>Construction (Section C)</b>	2021