



## **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. This 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 to 1996** NCDOT's Project Development and Environmental Analysis Branch (PDEA) conducted more detailed studies for the I-26 Connector.

**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.

**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 – 1999** 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. Records of the meetings can be found in the 2015 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

**1999** Partnering with the City of Asheville, the NCDOT invited the leaders of the interested business groups, affected neighborhoods, and other public interest groups to form the Community Coordinating Committee (CCC). The CCC was formed to facilitate public involvement and acquire public input on the project.

**2000** During the Project Design Forum in July 2000, many local citizens requested that NCDOT provide the missing interstate connections between the future I-26 and I-40. Currently, there are no 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 requested to the interchange would add these connections as well as relieve existing congestion and improve safety through this area. In 2001, nine conceptual alternatives were developed for the interchange, referred to as Section C.

Concurrently, three additional alternatives for Section B, Alternatives 4, 5, and 6, resulted from the Project Design Forum. 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.

The CCC and the NCDOT met 11 times throughout the year to discuss the I-26 Connector Project.

**2001** The CCC and NCDOT decided to eliminate Alternative 6 from further study due to a potential Environmental Justice issue caused by right-of-way impacts to the Hillcrest Apartment complex.

**2002** In July, 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 (Section A). After a new traffic forecast was developed, several studies were conducted to confirm the 8-lane recommendation. The Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) and the Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) began to meet regularly to discuss the I-26 Connector Project.

**2004** In June, NCDOT conducted an open-house Citizens Informational Workshop at the National Guard Armory in Asheville to present five alternatives (A-2, A-3, C-2, C-3, and D-1) for the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange improvements in Section C. Alternatives A-2, C-2, and D-1 were studied further for preliminary design after the workshop. The primary reason Alternative A-3 was not selected as a detailed study alternative was that the weaving section between the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange and the NC 191 (Brevard Road) interchange would be located along the interstate without a collector/distributor roadway. The primary reason Alternative C-3 was not selected for further study was that the slip ramp associated with the braided ramp was not able to be accommodated in the design, which would not provide direct access between the I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange and the NC 191 (Brevard Road) interchange.

The City of Asheville formed a local project aesthetics advisory committee (AAC) in June, to suggest appearance details to allow the project to reflect the character of the community. NCDOT worked with this committee and their recommendations 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 AAC also developed recommendations for the appearance of the proposed noise walls along the project. The CCC discussed the future of the committee and suggested the task of the committee had been completed. No additional CCC meetings are on record past 2004.

In July, NCDOT conducted a Project 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.

**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 AAC gathered public input for their appearance recommendations and the Asheville Design Center (ADC) presented a new conceptual alignment for Section B of the project. NCDOT conducted an initial review of the ADC concept.

Alternative F-1 in Section C was developed and carried forward into the preliminary design stage. This alternative would utilize much of the existing I-26/I-40/I-240 interchange and would provide the

missing interstate connections between the future I-26 and I-40.

**2007** NCDOT representatives met with ADC representatives in March 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 DEIS in March 2008 and held a Public Hearing in September 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 2010 traffic forecast was prepared.

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

**2010** A new project funding priority rating system was implemented by NCDOT, lowering the ranking of the I-26 Connector Project, which halted work. In the fall of 2011, Governor Bev Perdue announced a plan to accelerate Urban Loop projects around the state, including the I-26 Connector 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. Since 2012, project alternatives in Section "B" (the new location portion north of Patton Avenue, across the French Broad River) had been modified to avoid impacts to the Emma Road community and to identify multimodal connectivity between west Asheville and Asheville. A new alternative, Alternative 3-C, was developed, to further reduce impacts to the natural and human environments and is similar to Alternative 3, but with a smaller footprint connecting to US 19/23 further south of the Alternative 3 connection.

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

All Section B alternatives (3, 3-C, 4, and 4-B) 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 were completed to better accommodate future traffic demands while trying to further avoid or minimize impacts to the communities.

A public meeting was held in May to present updated information regarding the alternatives and design plans, provide a status update of the environmental studies and next steps, collect comments from the public on the alternatives, and announce the preparations for the new DEIS. NCDOT conducted three informal neighborhood meetings for the Burton Street neighborhood, the East West Asheville Neighborhood Area, and the Montford neighborhood

**2015** The Merger Team officially added Alternative 3-C 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, which was signed in October. The Public Hearing for the 2015 DEIS was held on November 16, 2015. Approximately 500 citizens attended and 1,454 comments were received throughout the comment period.

**2016** A Working Group was created at the request of the City of Asheville to discuss specific topics; including but not limited to the traffic forecast, visualizations, bicycle and pedestrian accommodations, design refinements, the creation of an Aesthetics Advisory Committee (AAC), noise policies and abatement measures. Members of the Working Group include the City of Asheville, Buncombe County, Asheville Design Center, the NCDOT project team, the consultant project team, , and various community representatives.

The Merger Team met on May 18, 2016 to choose a preferred alternative and chose Section B Alternative 4-B, Section A Widening Alternative, and Section C Alternative F-1 as the Least Environmentally Damaging Preferred Alternative (LEDPA).

The project team began to meet with neighborhoods and historic property owners to discuss the project status, potential impacts, mitigation techniques, and the project schedule. These neighborhoods and property owners include the Burton Street Community, Montford Neighborhood, Hillcrest, Houston/Courtland, Murphy Hill, West Asheville Business Association, the Freeman House property owners, and the Worley House property owners.

**Future Activities** The preliminary designs for the LEDPA will be refined using the 2016 Traffic Forecast and updated traffic studies. A Final Environmental Impact Statement will be issued using updated technical studies, avoidance and minimization efforts, a summary of the comments and responses from the 2015 Public Hearing, and a summary of any changes to designs and impacts that have occurred since publication of the 2015 DEIS.

<b>Final Environmental Impact Statement</b>	Winter 2017/2018
<b>Design Public Hearing</b>	Spring 2018
<b>Record of Decision</b>	Summer/Fall 2018