## LEAST ENVIRONMENTALLY DAMAGING PRACTICABLE ALTERNATIVE (LEDPA) AND AVOIDANCE AND MINIMIZATION MEASURES (AMM)



## I-85 Widening Improvements from US 321 in Gastonia to NC 273 in Belmont/Mount Holly and Improvements to NC 7 (Main Street) and US 29/74 (Wilkinson Boulevard) Intersection

Gaston County

STIP Project Nos. I-5719/U-5800

North Carolina Department of Transportation Division 12



## MERGER CONCURRENCE POINT NUMBERS 3 AND 4A

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## 1. Introduction

Lead federal agency: Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)

Primary points of contact for the subject project are:

- NCDOT PM Nora McCann
- Consultant PM Kat Bukowy (HNTB)

The purpose of this packet is to present relevant information to the Merger Team to achieve concurrence on the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA) and avoidance and minimization measures (AMM) taken thus far on the subject project.

#### 1.1 Project Description

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) proposes to widen I-85 in Gaston County from US 321 (Exit 17) in Gastonia to NC 273 (Exit 27) in Belmont/Mt. Holly, about 9.8 miles. This project is programmed in the 2020-2029 State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) as project number I-5719. To complete the widening and improve traffic operations and safety, the majority of the structures over I-85 will need to be replaced as part of this project.

STIP Project U-3608, improvements to N. Main Street from I-85 to US 74/29 in Belmont was also included with STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800. However, due to the reconfiguration of the Belmont Mt. Holly Road interchange with I-85 and the relocation of NC 7 and Main Street, U-3608 is now included as part of I-5719.

In addition, STIP Project U-5800 is also being studied and is included in the environmental documentation of I-5719. STIP Project U-5800 proposes improvements to the intersection of NC 7 (N. Main Street) and US 29/74 (Wilkinson Boulevard) in Belmont. Figure 1 shows the locations of each project.

#### 1.2 Purpose and Need of the Project

The primary needs to be addressed by STIP Project I-5719 are the existing and projected lack of capacity and outdated roadway design on the I-85 corridor. This results in frequent congestion and delays limiting east-west mobility. The congestion is a contributing factor to increased crash incidents. The purpose of the proposed improvements to I-85 is to reduce congestion and improve mobility in this growing area of Gaston County.

The primary need for the STIP Project U-5800 improvements to the intersection of N. Main Street and Wilkinson Boulevard is to alleviate congestion and improve safety at the intersection. The primary purpose is to improve traffic operations and safety at the intersection.

#### 1.3 Cost Estimates and Project History

#### Cost Estimate

The projects are in the 2020-2029 STIP approved by the NCDOT Board of Transportation on September 5, 2019, and most recently revised in September 2022. NCDOT anticipates Federal funding will be used for this project. Right-of-way (ROW) and Construction funding are scheduled for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024. The current STIP cost estimate is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. 2020-2029 STIP I-5719/U-5800 Cost Estimate			
Phase	I-5719	U-5800	
Right of Way	\$110,500,000	\$2,400,000	
Utilities	\$71,100,000	\$3,600,000	
Construction	\$442,800,000	\$4,400,000	
Total	\$624,400,000	\$10,400,000	
Note: cost estimates are subject to change.			

#### **Project History**

The project start of study letter was sent out on May 30, 2018. A Merger Screening was held on September 1, 2018.

The first Merger Meeting for the project was held in May 2018, with the goal of obtaining agreement on Concurrence Point 1 (Purpose and Need and Study Area Defined). The Merger Team was able to reach agreement on the Purpose and Need Statement for the project as well as the project study area. The purpose and need of the project are stated Section 1.2. The project study area is in central Gaston County and includes the municipalities of Gastonia, Lowell, McAdenville, Belmont, and Mt. Holly. The project study area boundary is approximately 1,000 feet wide, 500 feet to each side of the I-85 centerline.

The second Merger Meeting was held in January 2019. At this meeting, concurrence was achieved for Concurrence Point 2. Concurrence Point 2 included a No-Build and Build Alternative (widening) for detailed study. The No-Build is being retained through the project development process as a baseline comparative alternative in accordance with NEPA (40 CFR 1502.14(d)) and FHWA guidance (FHWA Technical Advisory T 6640.8A; p. 16). The Build Alternative for I-5719 proposes to widen I-85 between US 321 and NC 273 from six to eight through lanes with additional auxiliary lanes for the interchanges. Due to the deficiencies of most of the roadway bridges, interchanges, and railroad bridges, the structures will be replaced or improved. There are eight interchanges, six roadway bridges and four railroad bridges within the project. The Build Alternatives for U-5800 included a reduced conflict intersection (RCI) alternative and a traditional all-movement signalized intersection.

An Informational Merger Meeting was held in September 2021. During this meeting NCDOT presented the proposed design options for each interchange and bridge and indicated the preferred option that would be designed. The RCI was chosen for the preferred U-5800 option. The RCI has fewer impacts to Section 4(f) and Section 106 resources, and fewer relocations than the traditional intersection. No concurrence was requested at this meeting.

The third Merger Meeting was held in June 2022. At this meeting, concurrence was achieved for Concurrence Point 2A. Concurrence Point 2A included discussion of the proposed major hydraulic structures (equal to or larger than a 72-inch pipe or have an opening equal to or greater than 30 square feet) and alignment. All bridges over water are considered major hydraulic structures. A total of 13 potential major hydraulic crossings were concurred on for the proposed project.

The proposed project schedule is included in **Table 2**. This draft schedule is subject to change.

Table 2. STIP I-5719/U-5800 Draft Project Schedule		
Milestone	Schedule*	
Categorical Exclusion	December 2022	
Begin ROW Acquisition	FY 2024	
Begin Construction	FY 2024	
*tentative, subject to change		

### 2. Public Involvement

At the request of NCDOT, the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) issued a public notice regarding the project on August 5, 2022, with the comment period ending September 5, 2022. The USACE did not receive any comments on its public notice.

In August 2022, a series of public meetings were held to inform the public about the proposed project and obtain input. A Local Officials Informational Meeting (LOIM) was held on August 23<sup>rd</sup> at 2pm at Gaston College in Belmont, followed by a public meeting from 5 pm to 7 pm. A second LOIM was held on August 24<sup>th</sup> at 2pm at Gastonia Conference Center in Gastonia, followed by a second public meeting from 5 pm to 7 pm.

The LOIMs kicked off with a short video presentation followed by a question-and-answer session, providing local officials the opportunity to have their questions and concerns addressed by the NCDOT and HNTB Project Team. The public meeting maps were also on display for local officials to peruse.

Each public meeting was hosted in an open house format where citizens could drop in at any time between 5pm to 7pm. Attendees had the opportunity to walk around and view the public meeting maps and various other information presented on display boards to learn about the proposed project and ask NCDOT and other project team members questions. A "fly through" visualization was available as well as a more static visualization showing "before" and "after" renderings was also available for viewing. Handouts and comment sheets were distributed to attendees.

The meetings presented the public with an overview of the following information:

- Project location
- Purpose and Need for the project
- Project description
- Impact tables showing natural and human resource impacts of each alternative
- Anticipated construction closures
- Bicycle and pedestrian improvements
- Project cost
- Project schedule

A project website has been developed and includes the information presented at the public meetings. A 30-day comment period followed the public meetings, ending on September 23, 2022. The project is generally supported by the public based primarily upon a desire to reduce travel time traveling east to

west (or west to east) in Gaston County. 65 comments were received during the public comment period and classified by "categories of interest." The categories of greatest interest were design, noise, and right-of-way.

## 3. CP 3: Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA)

The Detailed Study Alternatives were evaluated using preliminary design right of way and slope stakes plus 25 feet. A summary of impacts is included in **Table 3** and **Figure 2**.

Resource	Impacts from the Build Alternatives			
Streams (ft)	5,220			
Wetlands (ac)	<0.1			
Ponds (ac)	0			
100-year Floodplain (ac)	11.8			
500-year Floodplain (ac)	2.3			
Water Supply Watershed Protected Area (ac)	59			
Section 4(f) Resource (#)				
Sims Legion Park (0.5 ac)				
Piedmont & Northern Rail Historic District (8.9 ac)				
Faith United Methodist Church (0.3 ac)	7			
McAdenville Historic District (0.2 ac)				
McAdenville Historic District No. 3 (1.2 ac)				
Belmont Abbey College Historic District (4.2 ac)				
Section 106 Resource (Effects Determination)				
Piedmont & Northern Rail Historic District (Two Location	ns) – Adverse Effect;			
Programmatic 4(f) Evaluation Faith United Methodist Church – No Adverse Effect Flint Manufacturing Company, Mill No. 2 – No Adverse Effect Wrights Chapel AME Zion Church – No Adverse Effect McAdenville Historic District – No Adverse Effect				
		McAdenville Historic District No. 3 – No Adverse Effect		
		Belmont Fabric Company-South Fork Manufacturing Mil	ll Village – No Adverse Effect	
		Belmont Abbey College Historic District – No Adverse Effect		
		Section 6(f) Resource	0	
Church / Cemetery (#)				
O'Connor Grove AME Zion Church				
Faith United Methodist Church				
Wat Luangphor PhaNgao Buddharam Buddhist Temple O'Connor Grove AME Zion Church Cemetery St. Benedict (St. Leo) Cemetery3 / 4				
		Belmont Abbey College Cemetery		
		McAdenville Town Cemetery		

<sup>1</sup> Impacts calculated using slope stake limits plus 25 feet. As the design progresses, additional avoidance and minimization measures are anticipated to be incorporated to avoid or reduce impacts.

NCDOT recommends the 8-lane widening alternative (Build Alternative) as the LEDPA for STIP Project I-5719. The Build Alternative is the only practicable alternative that meets the purpose and need of the project. For these reasons, NCDOT is recommending the Build Alternative as its Preferred Alternative for STIP Project I-5719.

NCDOT recommends the reduced conflict intersection design (Build Alternative) because it avoids an Adverse Effect to the Belmont Historic District for U-5800.

## 4. CP 4A: Avoidance and Minimization Measures

Avoidance and minimization measures (AMMs) have been undertaken throughout development of the I-5719/U-5800 project.

#### I-5719

- Measures to avoid and minimize impacts to potential jurisdictional waters of the US were
  incorporated into the best fit design of I-85 and proposed interchange improvements. The
  presence of parks, historic boundaries, and residential and commercial buildings were also taken
  into consideration when developing the alignments. See the <u>Informational Merger Meeting
  Packet</u> for more information regarding the interchange and bridge options chosen and
  associated impacts.
- Retaining walls were incorporated throughout the project corridor to avoid additional right-ofway impacts, Section 4(f) properties, NRHP-eligible historic properties, jurisdictional streams, and gas lines.
  - A retaining wall is included in the proposed design along I-85 northbound near MLK Jr. Way/Marietta Street to avoid impacts to Sims Legion Park, a Section 4(f) property.
  - To avoid impacts to a jurisdictional stream, a retaining wall is included along I-85 southbound near the Piedmont and Northern (P&N) Railway and E. Ozark Avenue ramps. Please note that because the stream is within the 25-foot buffer approximately 40 feet is included in the stream impacts shown in Table 3.
  - A retaining wall is included in the proposed design along I-85 southbound near E. Ozark Avenue to avoid impacts to Faith United Methodist Church, a NRHP-Eligible historic property.
  - A retaining wall is included along I-85 northbound just west of New Hope Road interchange, to avoid impacts to four homes and six parcels along Villard Street.
  - Retaining walls under New Hope Road interchange tightens the design to avoid impacts to commercial properties.
  - A retaining wall along the I-85 southbound on-ramp at Cox Road to avoid impacts to Remount Road and commercial properties.
  - A retaining wall along the I-85 northbound on-ramp at Cox Road to avoid impacts to the Hilton Garden Inn and avoids fill in the adjacent stream and wetland.
  - A retaining wall along the I-85 northbound off-ramp to Main Street (McAdenville) to avoid impacts to the right of way for the Kinder Morgan pipeline.
  - A retaining wall is included in the proposed design along I-85 northbound near North Main Street in Belmont to avoid impacts to the Gaston County Visitors Center.
- At S. Main Street in Lowell, used roundabout designs to facilitate traffic and increase safety. Used 2:1 slope stake limits to avoid impacts to jurisdictional stream.

- Reduced Reid Street (Lowell) width, tapering to the existing culvert to avoid a culvert extension.
- Revised the Main Street (McAdenville) interchange to a tight diamond avoiding two gas stations.
- Shifted Hickory Grove Road to the east avoiding additional impacts to the Piedmont and North Railway Linear Historic District and stream.
- Reduced the right turn bay to I-85 northbound on-ramp by 120 feet to avoid impacts to McAdenville Historic District.
- Reduced sidewalk and berm to 5 feet on southbound side of Main Street in McAdenville to minimize impacts to McAdenville Historic District.
- Reduced railroad design improvements on P&N Railway south of I-85 to avoid impacts to a stream.
- The entirety of the I-85 widening project will occur on the existing alignment, except a stretch of I-85 between MLK Jr. Way/Marietta Street and Modena Street. This section is proposed to be realigned due to sight distance issues. The centerline of I-85 in this section will be realigned by approximately 50 feet south of existing. This is a 0.11 acre reduction to wetlands and 614 feet reduction in stream impacts.
- Reducing existing N. Main Street in Belmont to three lanes and using existing curb to the west for design avoids impacts to O'Connor's Grove AME Zion Church and Cemetery. Existing impervious surface that is no longer needed will be removed and replaced with plantings.
- No new major hydraulic structures are proposed. A total of 13 potential major hydraulic crossings were identified for the proposed project. All sites are proposed to retain, extend, and/or widen the existing structures, except at Site 8, where a supplemental pipe is proposed. Existing drainage patterns are anticipated to be maintained.
- No design improvements required at NC 273 thus avoiding impacts to Colonial Pipeline.

#### U-5800

- The RCI design avoids impacts to the Belmont Historic District.
- Wilkinson Boulevard mimics the existing reduced lane width (11 feet) to fit within the existing footprint.

#### 5. Next Steps

Prior to the next Merger Meeting, NCDOT will Let the project for final design and construction, likely as a Design-Build project. It is anticipated that the CP 4B meeting will be held in 2024 or 2025 once the Design-Build team is under contract and designs have been refined. Merger Team members will be notified of any changes that require a revision of this timetable.

#### Section 404/NEPA Merger Project Team Meeting Agreement Concurrence Point No. 3 Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA)

STIP Project I-5719: I-85 Widening Improvements from US 321 to NC 273.

STIP Project U-5800: Improvements to NC 7 (Main Street) and US 29/74 (Wilkinson Boulevard) Intersection.

The Merger Team has concurred on this date of November 17, 2022, that the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternatives (LEDPA) for

STIP Project I-5719: Build Alternative – eight-lane, best fit widening of I-85

STIP Project U-5800: Build Alternative – reduced conflict intersection design

USACE	FHWA
USEPA	NCDOT
USFWS	NCHPO
NCDWR	GCLMPO
NCWRC	_

#### Section 404/NEPA Merger Project Team Meeting Agreement Concurrence Point No. 4A Avoidance & Minimization Measures (AMM)

STIP Project I-5719: I-85 Widening Improvements from US 321 to NC 273.

STIP Project U-5800: Improvements to NC 7 (Main Street) and US 29/74 (Wilkinson Boulevard) Intersection.

The Merger Team has concurred on this date of November 17, 2022, on the Avoidance and Minimization Measures:

#### I-5719

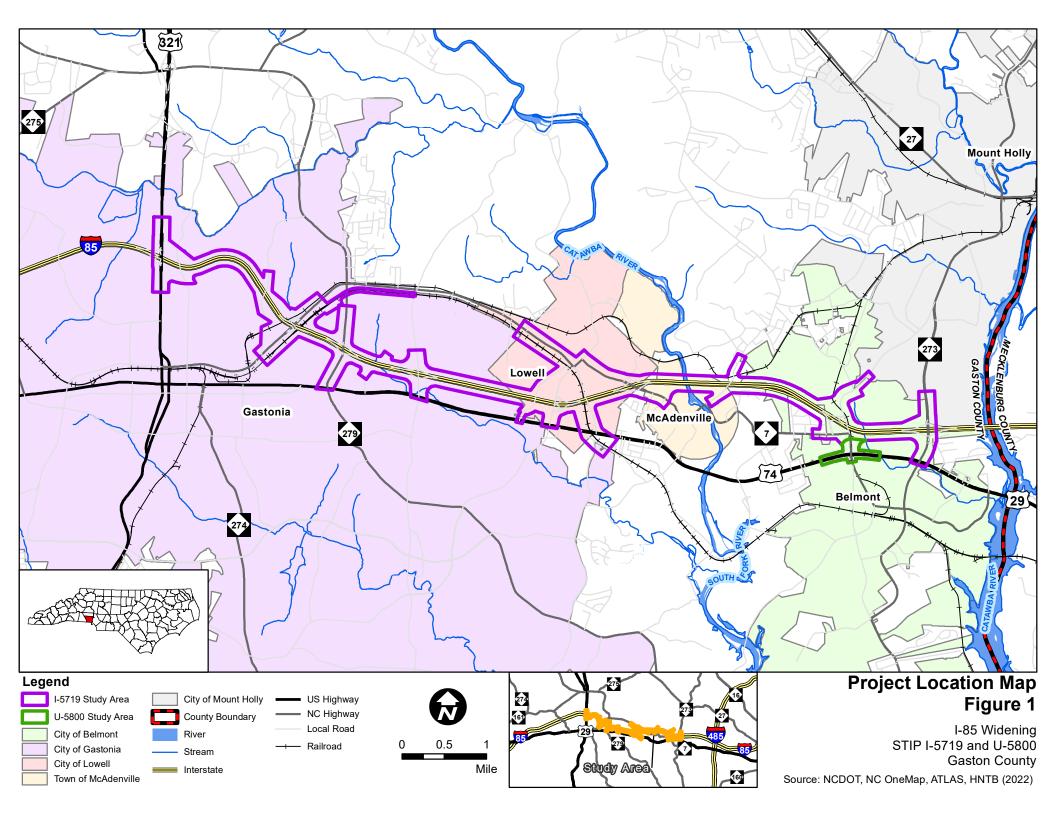
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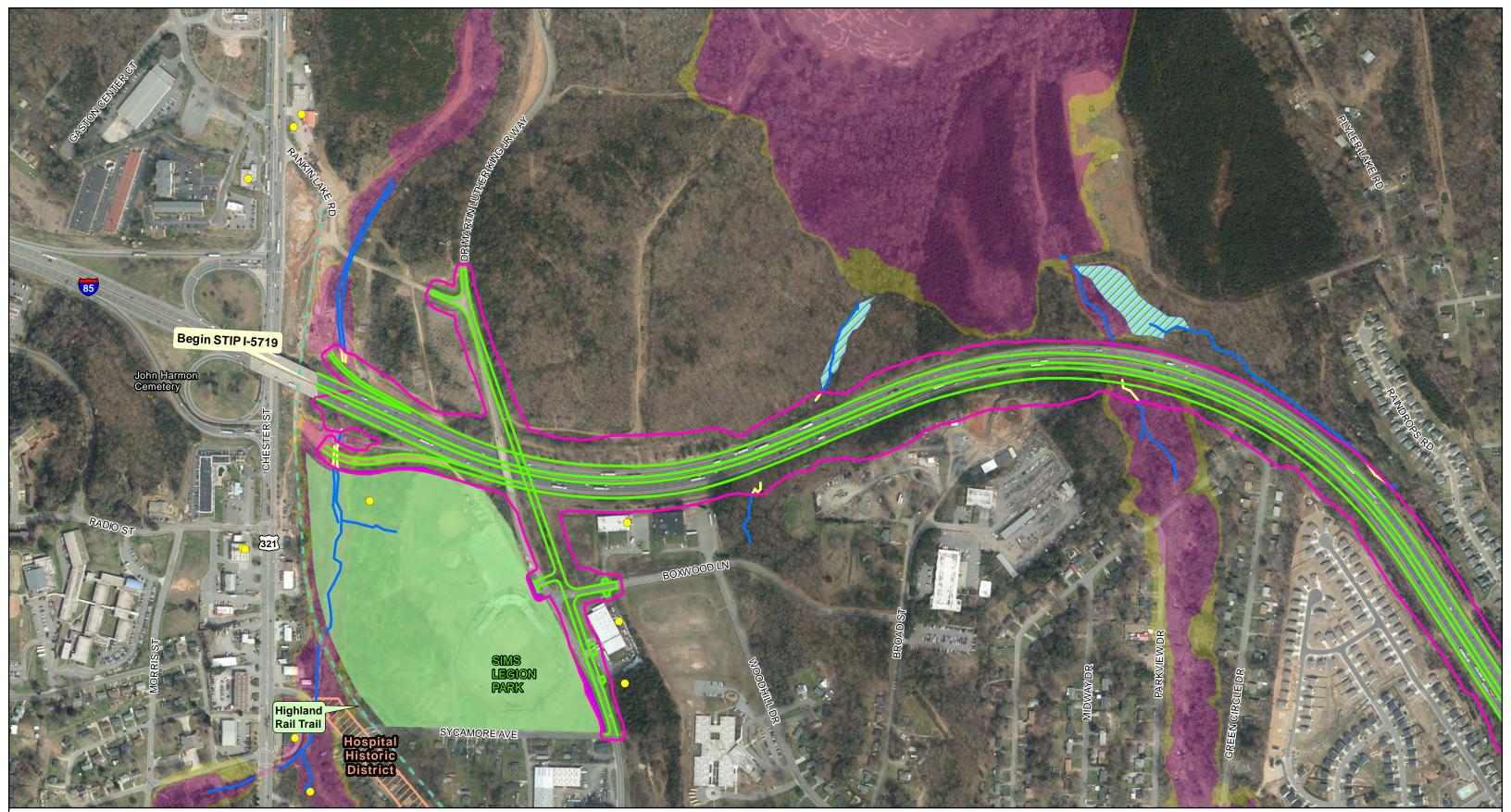
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#### U-5800

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- Wilkinson Boulevard mimics the existing reduced lane width (11 feet) to fit within the existing footprint.

USACE	FHWA
USEPA	NCDOT
USFWS	NCHPO
NCDWD	COMPO
NCDWR	_GCLMPO
NCWRC	





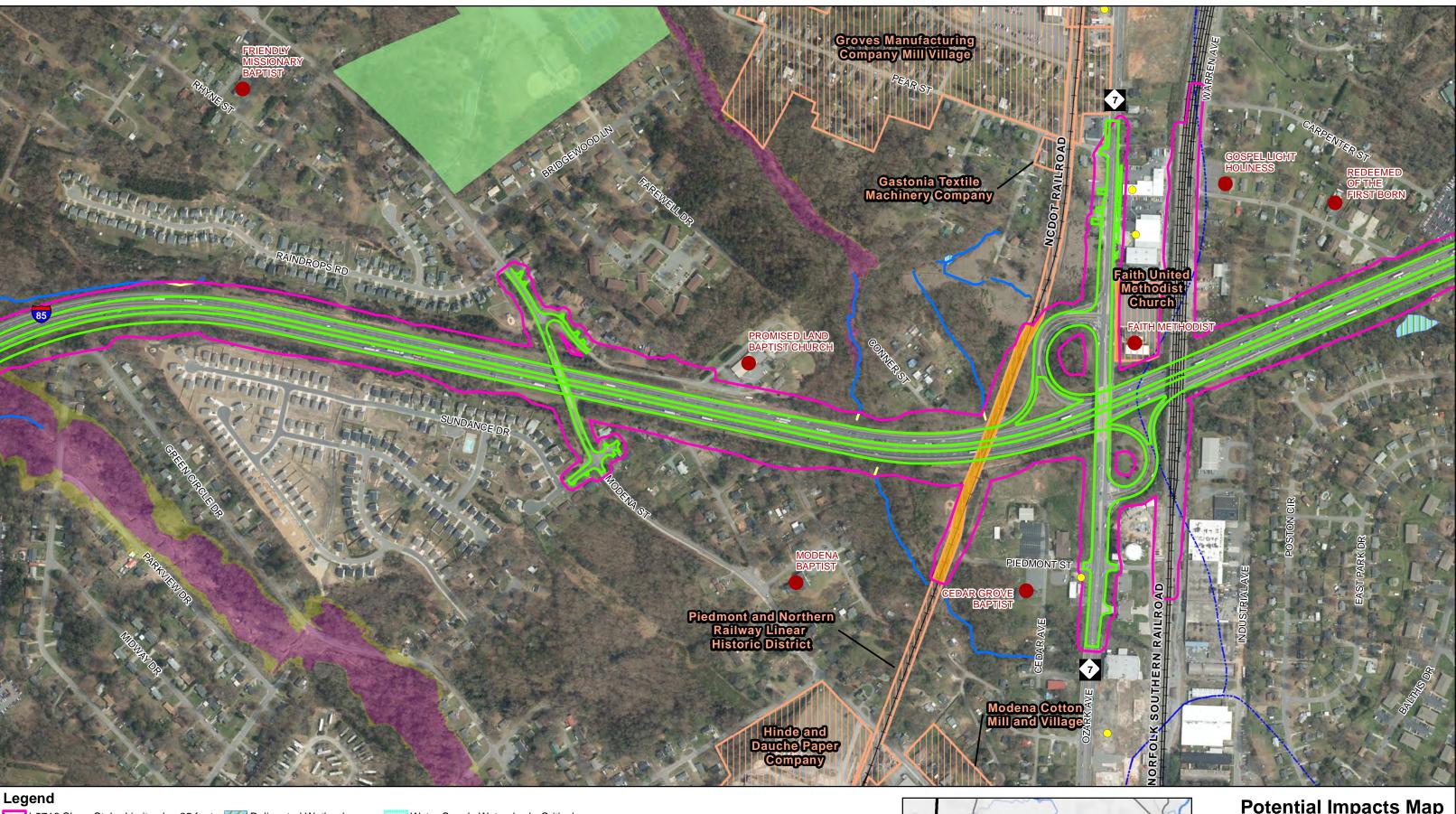






## Potential Impacts Map Figure 2a

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County

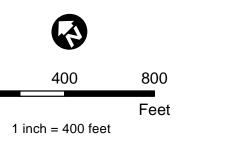


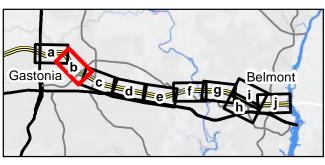


Potential Stream Impacts Potential Wetland Impacts Potential Historic Impacts Potential Park Impacts Delineated Streams



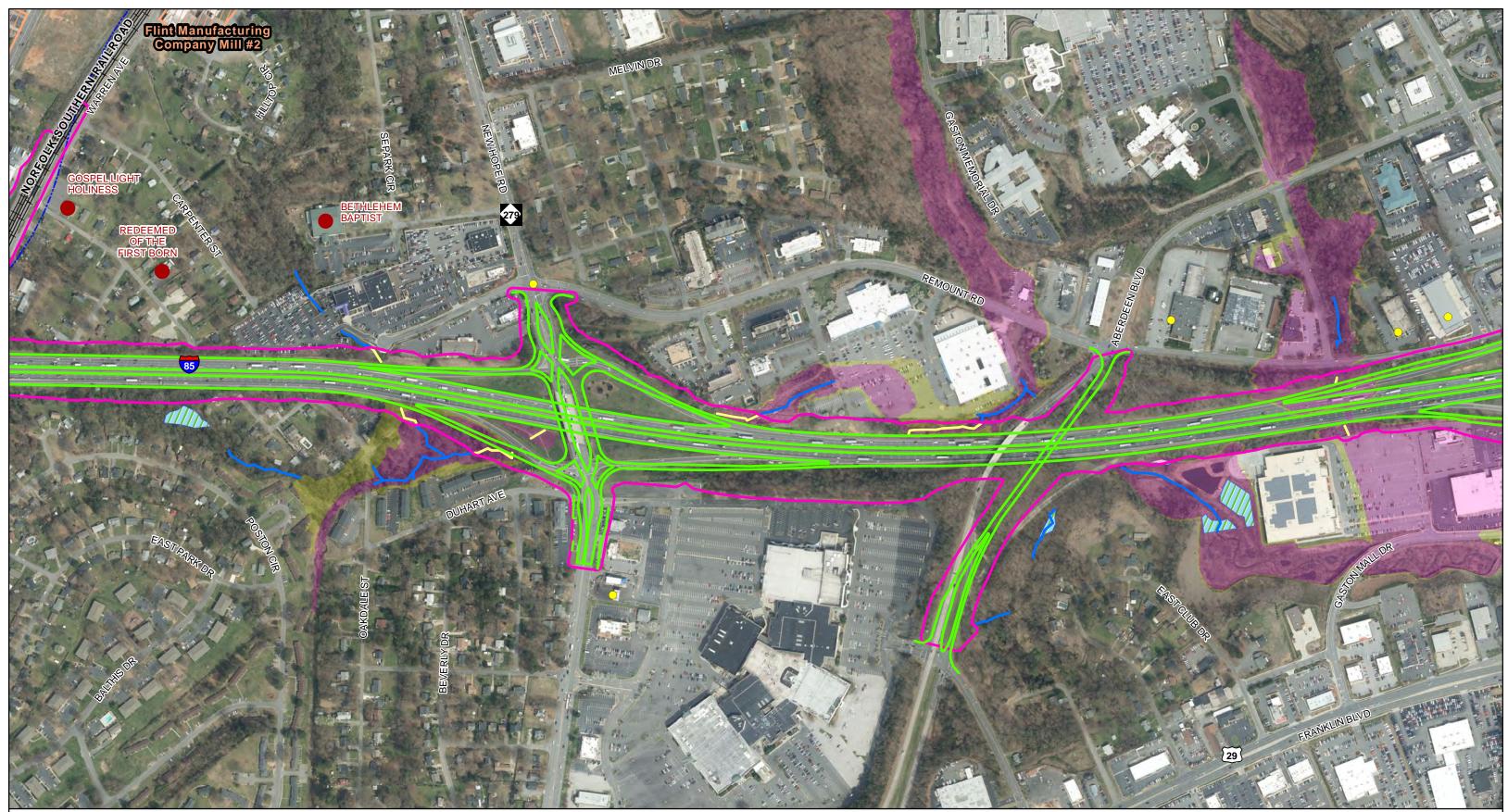






## Potential Impacts Map Figure 2b

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County



#### Legend

- I-5719 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet

   U-5800 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet

   Proposed Edge of Travel

   Potential Stream Impacts

   Potential Wetland Impacts

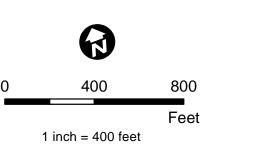
   Potential Historic Impacts

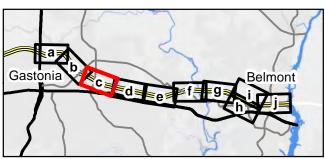
   Potential Park Impacts

   Delineated Streams
  - Delineated Wetlands
    NCHPO Historic Boundary
    Park
    Hazardous Waste Sites
    Places of Worship
    Cemetery
    500-Year Floodplain

100-Year Floodplain







## Potential Impacts Map Figure 2c

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County

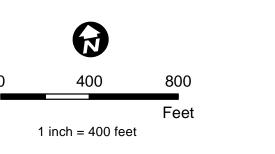


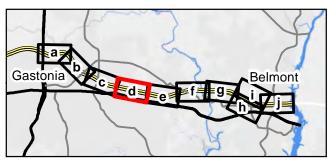
#### Legend

- I-5719 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet 🔤 U-5800 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet 🗾 Proposed Edge of Travel Potential Stream Impacts Potential Wetland Impacts Potential Historic Impacts Potential Park Impacts Delineated Streams
  - //// Delineated Wetlands NCHPO Historic Boundary Park Hazardous Waste Sites Places of Worship Cemetery

-

- 500-Year Floodplain 100-Year Floodplain
- Water Supply Watershed Critical Water Supply Watershed - Protected Targeted Watershed - Greenway/Blueway ----- Railroad River

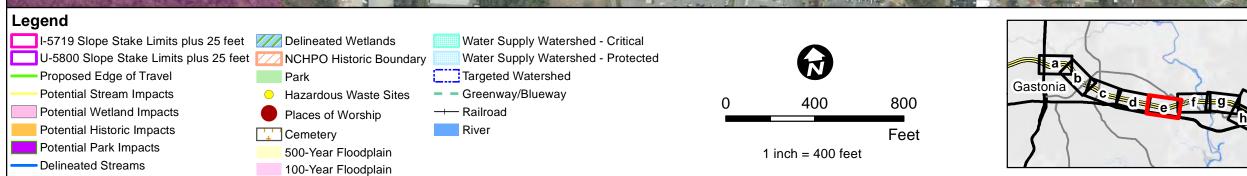




## **Potential Impacts Map** Figure 2d

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County

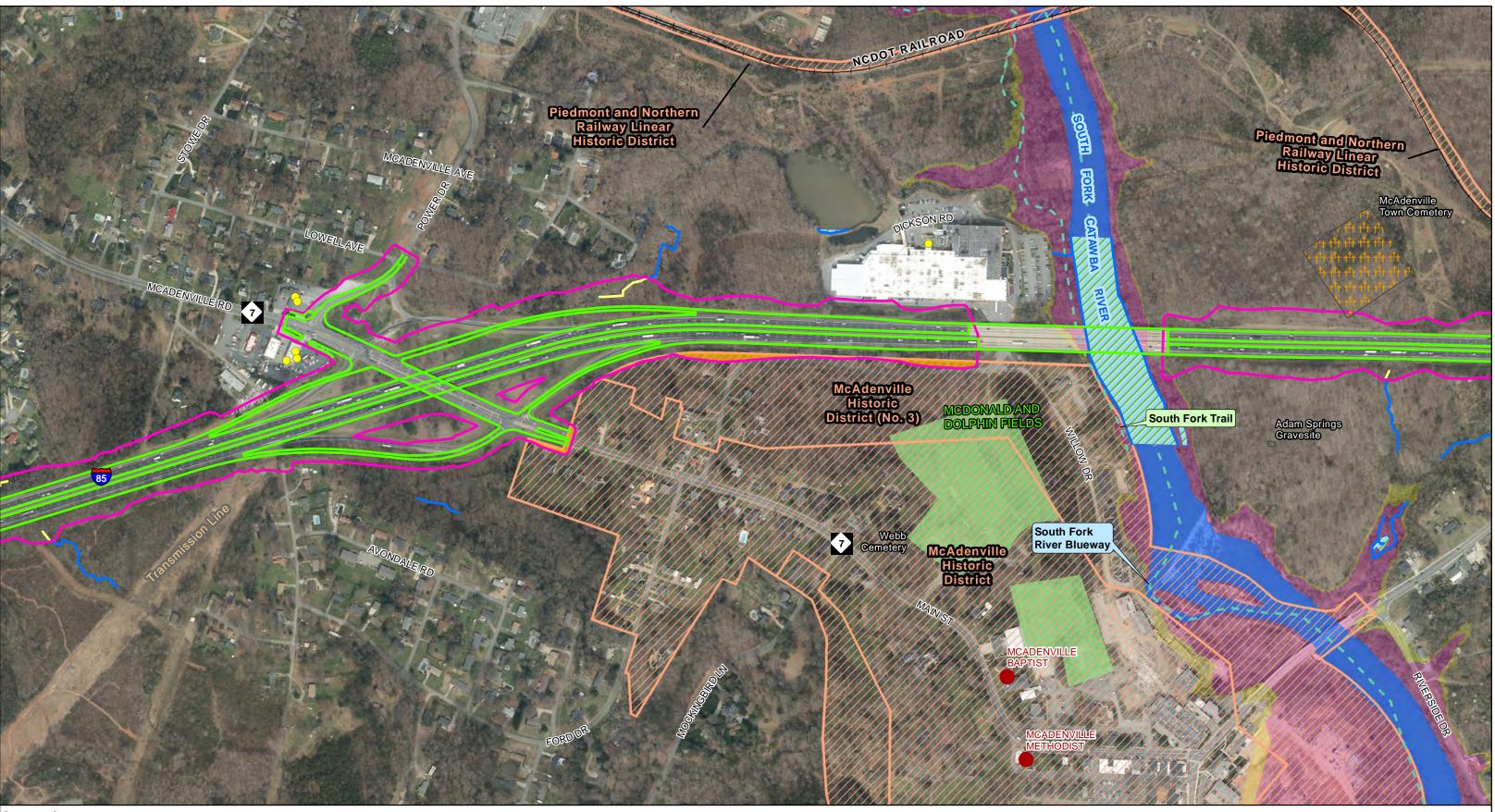




# Potential Impacts Map Figure 2e

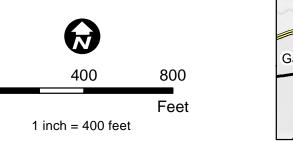
Belmont

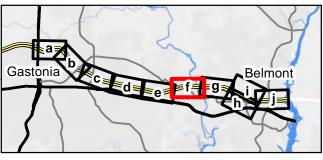
I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County



#### Legend

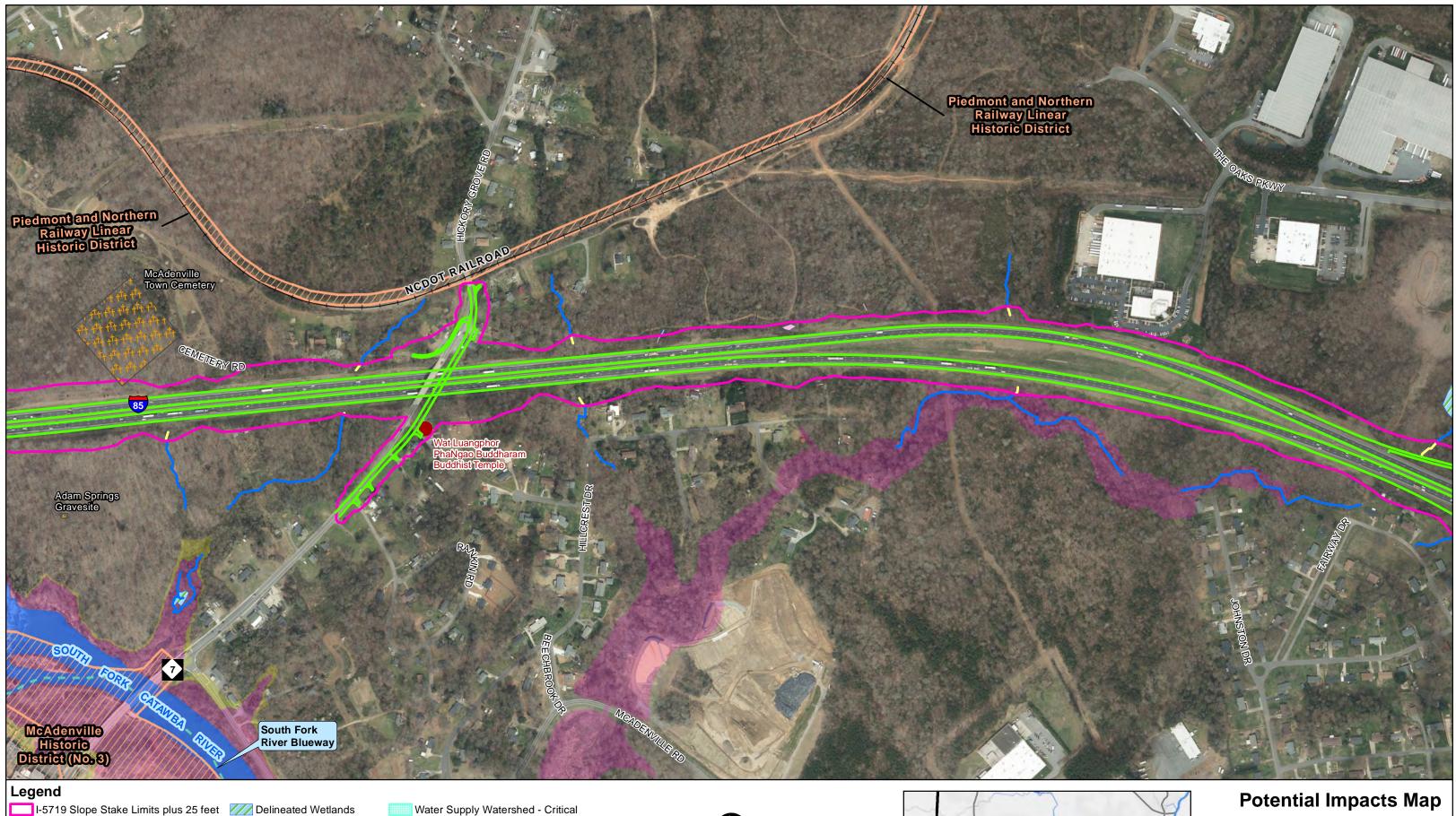
/// Delineated Wetlands I-5719 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet Water Supply Watershed - Critical 🔤 U-5800 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet 🗾 Water Supply Watershed - Protected NCHPO Historic Boundary Proposed Edge of Travel Targeted Watershed Park Potential Stream Impacts Hazardous Waste Sites - Greenway/Blueway ------ Railroad Potential Wetland Impacts Places of Worship River Potential Historic Impacts Cemetery **Potential Park Impacts** 500-Year Floodplain Delineated Streams 100-Year Floodplain





## Potential Impacts Map Figure 2f

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County



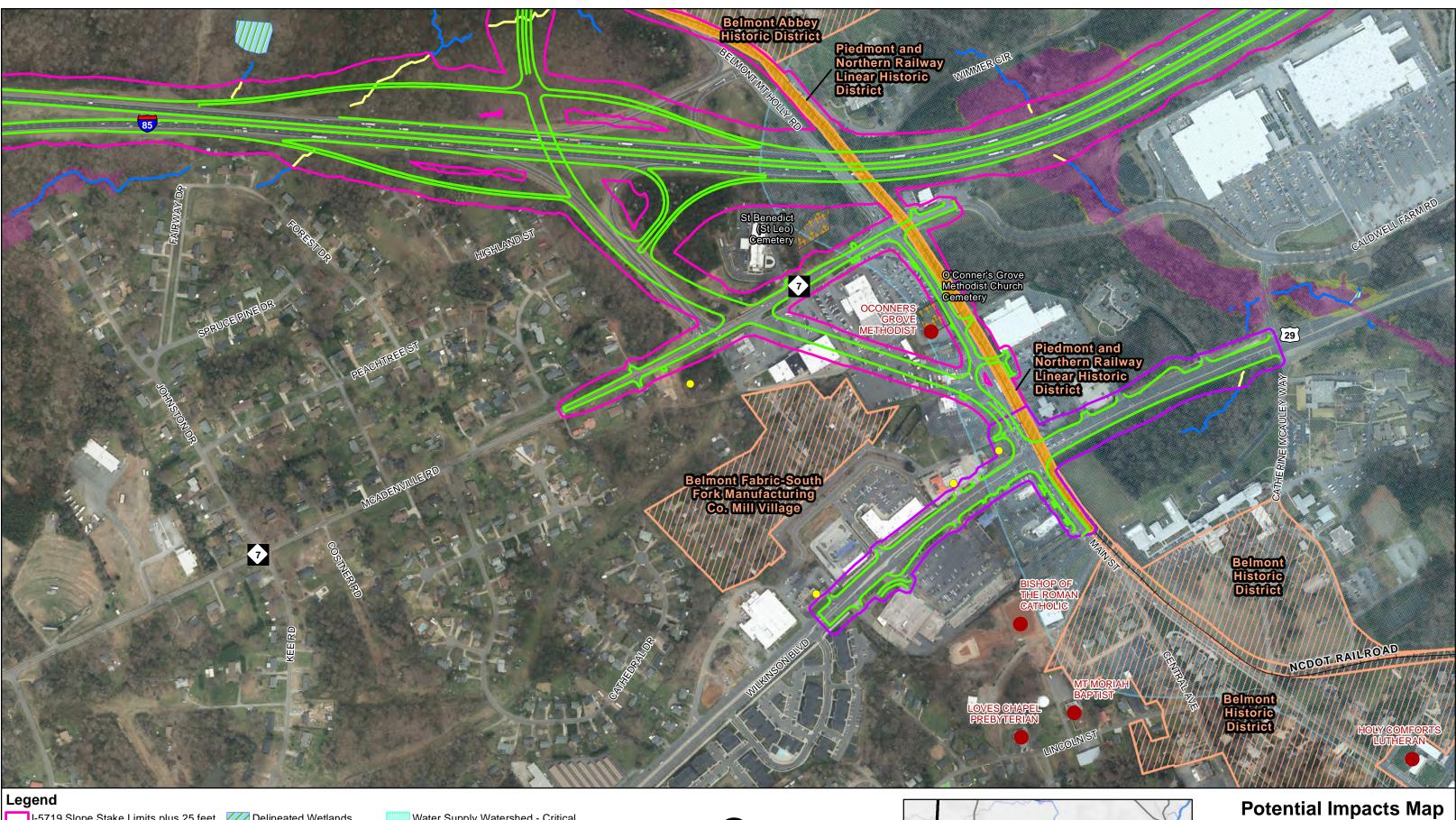




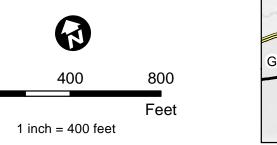


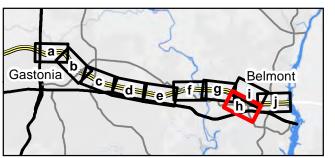
## Potential Impacts Map Figure 2g

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County



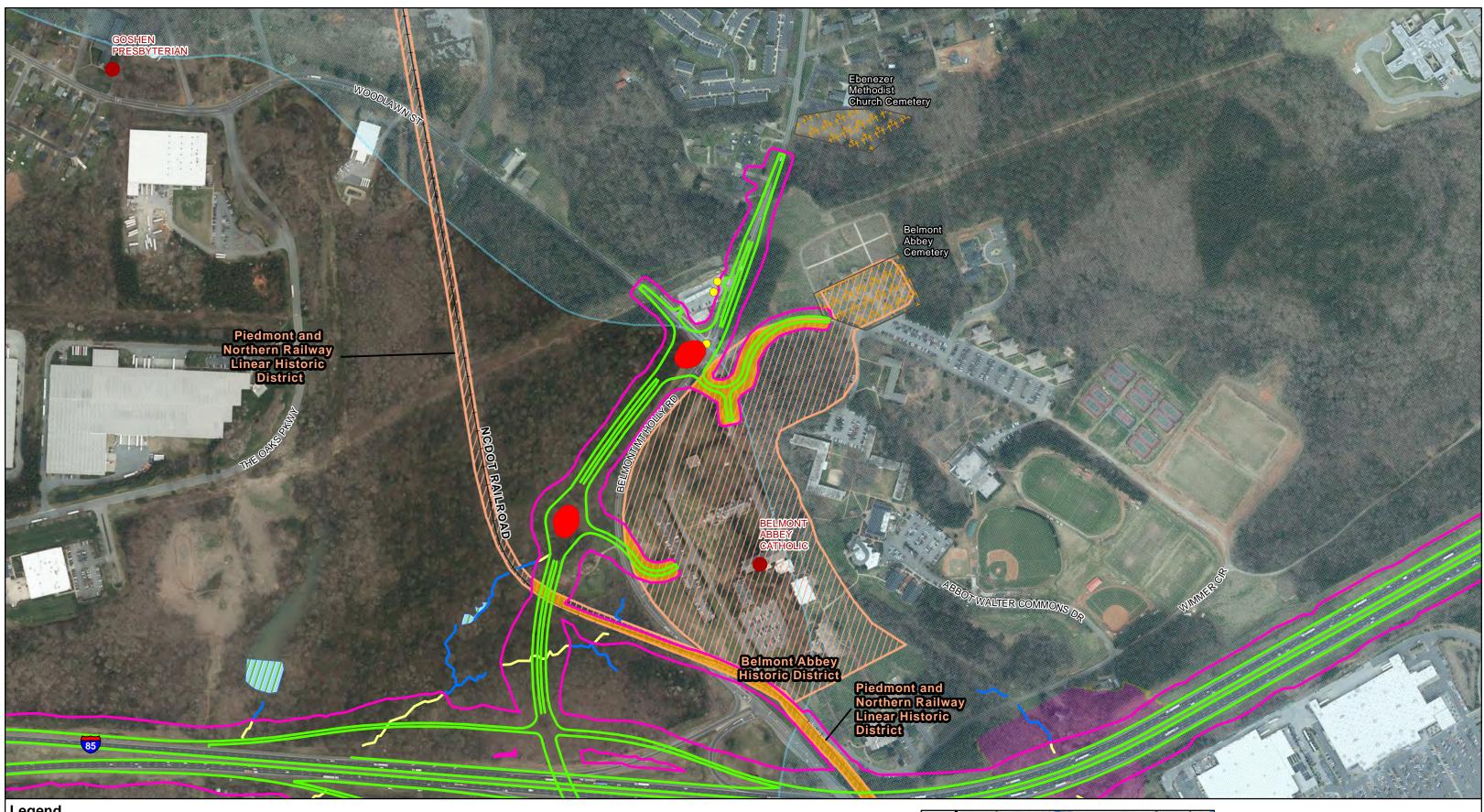
- I-5719 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet 🔤 U-5800 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet 🗾 Proposed Edge of Travel Potential Stream Impacts Potential Wetland Impacts Potential Historic Impacts Potential Park Impacts Delineated Streams
  - *—* Delineated Wetlands NCHPO Historic Boundary Park Hazardous Waste Sites Places of Worship Cemetery 500-Year Floodplain 100-Year Floodplain
- Water Supply Watershed Critical Water Supply Watershed - Protected Targeted Watershed -- Greenway/Blueway ----- Railroad River

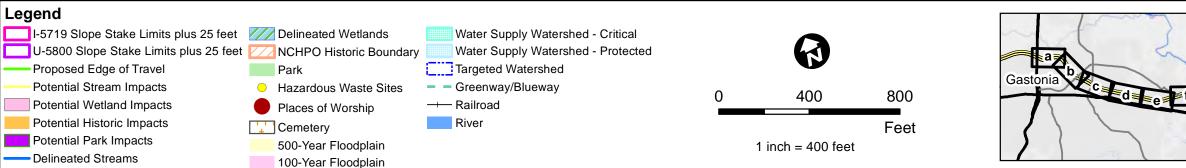


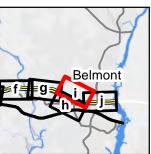


# Figure 2h

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County

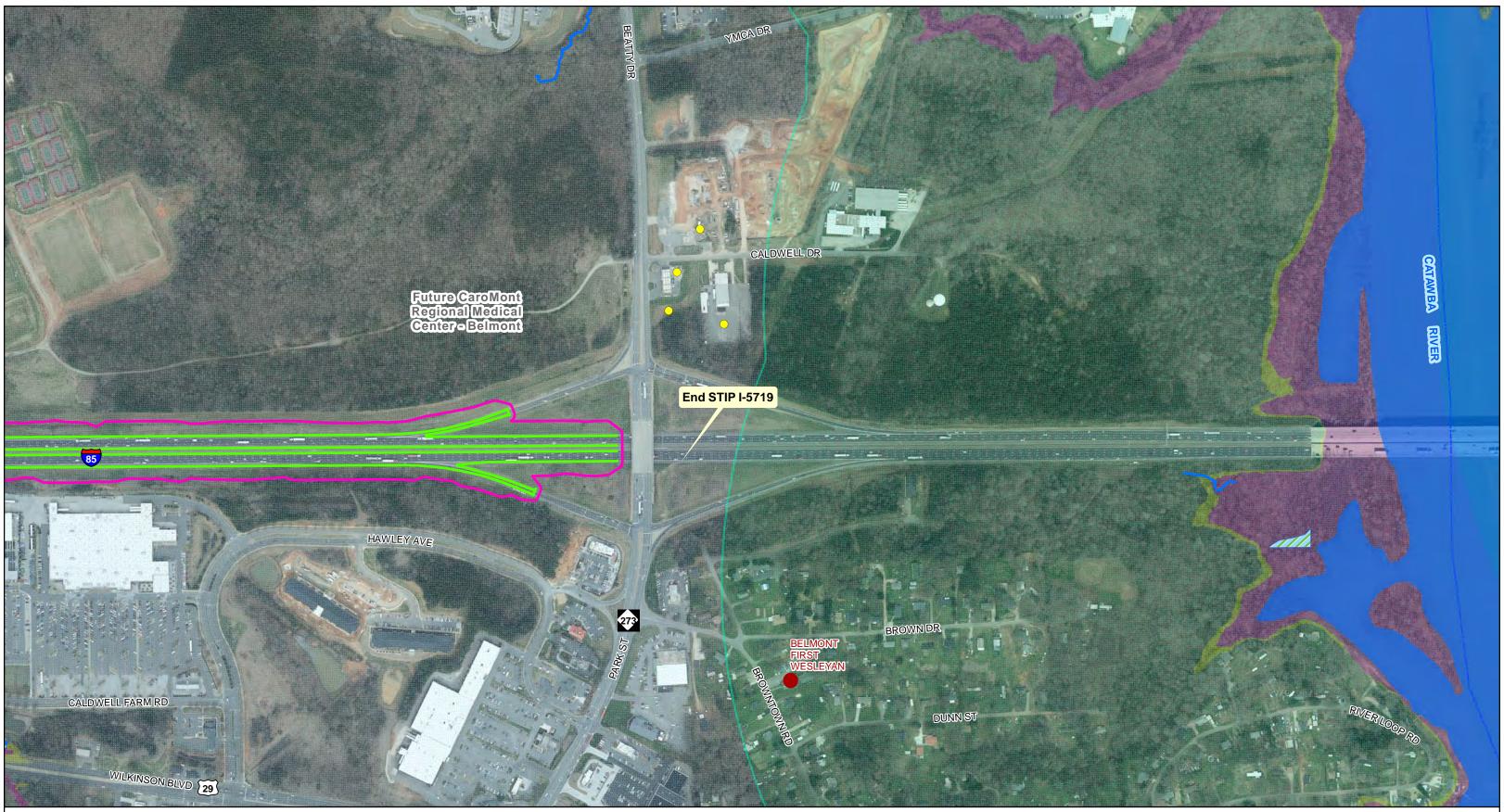






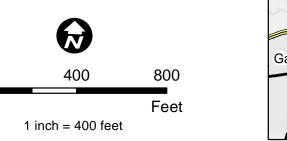
## Potential Impacts Map Figure 2i

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County



#### Legend

- I-5719 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet 🔤 U-5800 Slope Stake Limits plus 25 feet 🗾 Proposed Edge of Travel Park Potential Stream Impacts Potential Wetland Impacts Potential Historic Impacts Cemetery Potential Park Impacts Delineated Streams 100-Year Floodplain
  - /// Delineated Wetlands NCHPO Historic Boundary Hazardous Waste Sites Places of Worship River 500-Year Floodplain
- Water Supply Watershed Critical Water Supply Watershed - Protected Targeted Watershed Greenway/Blueway ----- Railroad





## **Potential Impacts Map** Figure 2j

I-85 Widening STIP Projects I-5719 and U-5800 Gaston County