



CITY OF DURHAM | NORTH CAROLINA

Date: January 24, 2008

To: Patrick W. Baker, City Manager
Through: Theodore L. Voorhees, Deputy City Manager
Kathryn R. Kalb, Public Works Director
From: Mark D. Ahrendsen, Transportation Manager
Subject: Alston Avenue Widening Project (TIP Project U-3308)

The purpose of this memo is to bring you up to date on the status and schedule of the Alston Avenue widening project and to explain to you why the Administration does not support the widening as currently proposed.

The widening of Alston Avenue has been included in Durham's Long Range Transportation Plan for over thirty years. The purpose of the project is to reduce congestion and improve safety along Alston Avenue between the Durham Freeway (NC 147) and Holloway Street (NC 98). Year 2005 traffic volumes along Alston Avenue range from 17,000 to 20,000 vehicles per day and exceed the capacity of the roadway. The accident rate along Alston Avenue in the project area is considerably over the statewide average for similar facilities.

Accordingly, NCDOT had programmed the widening of Alston Avenue in the 2007-2013 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) with right-of-way acquisition scheduled for FY 2007 and construction scheduled to begin in FY 2009. The draft 2009-2015 TIP delays right-of-way acquisition to FY 2008 and delays commencement of construction to FY 2011. The total cost of the project is estimated at \$28,320,000.00. NCDOT was scheduled to begin right-of-way acquisition late last year but delayed commencement of this process until March 2008 to afford the City and Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization (DCHC MPO) an opportunity to reconsider its position on this project. If no action to the contrary is taken by either the City or MPO, the project will proceed as scheduled.

An Administrative Action – Finding of No Significant Impact (EA/FONSI) was completed for the project in June 2007. The City has worked closely with NCDOT on the environmental study and the design of the Alston Avenue widening project and has offered numerous comments on the project. The final scope of the project and several changes made to the project in response to concerns raised by the City are described below:

Alston Avenue between the Durham Freeway and Holloway Street is a three-lane facility (one lane in each direction and center turn lane) for most of its length with sidewalks on both sides. The existing right-of-way varies between 46 and 80 feet.

The proposed project will widen Alston Avenue to a four-lane median divided roadway for most of its length with wide outside lanes for bicycles and sidewalks on both sides. It is expected that the median will be landscaped. The bridge carrying Pettigrew Street over

Alston Avenue and the three railroad bridges over Alston Avenue will be replaced as part of the project. A total right-of-way width of between 100 and 120 feet will be required to accommodate the proposed improvements.

Several side streets along the project will be converted from two-way to one-way traffic as part of the project. Worth, Franklin and Wall Streets on the west side of Alston will be narrowed to 20 feet wide with curb and gutter on both sides and converted to one-way traffic. A narrow sidewalk will be provided along both sides of these streets. Wall Street east of Alston will remain two way, but the intersection of this portion of Wall Street with Alston Avenue is proposed to be removed and replaced with a cul-de-sac. The intersection of Eva Street west of Alston Avenue will also be removed and replaced with a cul-de-sac.

The proposed project passes through the Hope VI Revitalization Area and is anticipated to result in the relocation of nineteen homes, 4 businesses, one church, and two apartment buildings. The project is adjacent to the historic Branson Methodist Church and Pure Oil Filling Station and runs through the Golden Belt Historic District.

NCDOT has agreed to make several changes to the proposed design of the project in response to concerns raised by the City. These changes are described below:

- The following exclusive right turn lanes have been deleted from the proposed design since the public hearing:

Westbound Taylor Street
Eastbound and Westbound Liberty Street
Northbound Alston Avenue at Main Street
Northbound Alston Avenue at Taylor Street
Eastbound Holloway Street

- Worth Street on the east side of Alston Avenue, was proposed as a one-way street. The design was changed to retain the existing configuration for east side Worth Street as a two-lane street. No additional improvements will be made to this street.
- Franklin Street, on the east side of Alston Avenue, was proposed as a one-way street. The design was changed to retain the existing configuration for east side Franklin Street as a two-lane street. No additional improvement will be made to this street.
- Curb radii's were reduced along the entire project to a variable radius of 20 to 35 feet at the request of the City of Durham.
- Six-foot sidewalks are proposed along the project. Because of the request for six-foot sidewalks, the City of Durham would be required to pay full cost for the extra foot of sidewalk. A municipal agreement will be prepared regarding the provision of sidewalks prior to project construction. If the City of Durham decides not to pay for the additional foot of sidewalk, standard five (5) foot wide sidewalks will be proposed along Alston Avenue.
- The following additional changes have been made to the design since the beginning of the project:

- Reduced design speed to 35mph from 40mph.
- Reduced the vertical clearance underneath the railroad and Pettigrew Street bridges to 15'6" from 16'6".
- Reduced the width of the inside travel lane to 11'.
- Reduced the width of the left turn lanes to 11'.
- Added 14' outside lanes at the request of Durham for bicycle and vehicular dual use.
- Removed right turn lanes along Alston Avenue at Angier, Main, Taylor, Liberty and Holloway Streets.
- Connected Franklin, Worth and Wall Streets on the west side of Alston Avenue by making them one-way streets.
- Added sidewalk along Gann Street up to Pettigrew Street to provide pedestrian access to future TTA station.
- Added mid-block pedestrian crosswalks to Alston Avenue with high visibility markings.
- Agreed to require high visibility crosswalks at all signalized intersections.
- Agreed to include mast arms and pedestrian actuated signals at all signalized intersections.
- Increased median island widths to 5' at intersections and extended where possible to provide pedestrian protection.
- Agreed to provide aesthetic treatments on any proposed retaining walls to match the existing walls in the area.

While many of the City's comments on the widening project have been addressed by the design changes described above, several have not. These outstanding concerns are listed below:

- Right turn lanes – Right turn lanes are not pedestrian friendly and create greater adverse right-of-way impacts. We have requested that all exclusive right turn lanes along Alston Avenue be eliminated. NCDOT has agreed to remove some but not all right turn lanes.
- Provision of a three foot striped bike lane – NCDOT has denied the City's request for a three foot striped bike lane adjacent to the two foot gutter.
- Reduction of roadway grade under the railroad bridge – The grade of Alston Avenue is to be lowered approximately 6.5 feet at the railroad bridge to maintain a 15.5 foot vertical clearance. We are concerned with the "tunnel effect" this grade change will create and requested consideration of alternate designs to limit this grade change to no more than three feet. NCDOT was unable to make any further roadway grade changes.
- Relocation of the grocery store at the corner of Main Street and Alston Avenue – The current design of the project will take the neighborhood grocery store at the intersection of Main Street and Alston Avenue. We expressed concern about the adverse effect the loss of this grocery store will have on the surrounding neighborhood and requested that provisions be made to relocate a grocery store to another site in the immediate vicinity of the existing grocery store. This should include the necessary land acquisition for the grocery store and/or a new building and associated relocation/start up costs. We expressed belief that this was an

environmental justice issue. NCDOT indicated that they would purchase the property on which the grocery store is located through the normal right-of-way acquisition process and would pay the business owner a reestablishment fee and searching expenses as is applicable. Because of changes to the community and based on community data, NCDOT indicated that Environmental Justice (EJ) does not apply to the project area.

In addition to the aforementioned specific issues, staff continues to have concerns with the adverse impacts that a four-lane divided roadway will have on East Durham, from a transportation, community and economic development perspective. These concerns are described below:

- The character of the area has changed considerably since the plan for widening Alston Avenue was conceived. Many of the major employers in the area that existed when the roadway widening was conceived no longer exist. These employers have been replaced by residential development (e.g., Durham Hosiery Mill), a new elementary school (Eastway) and employers of a different kind (e.g., Golden Belt), continuing to create a high level of pedestrian activity in the area. The proposed design is not pedestrian friendly in that pedestrians could have to cross six lanes (two through lanes in each direction and exclusive right and left turn lanes) at certain intersections vs. the three lanes they cross now. This increased crossing distance would also require more “green time” for the pedestrian thereby reducing the vehicular efficiency of the signalized intersection.
- The existing right-of-way along Alston Avenue is between 46 and 80 feet. The right-of-way for the widened roadway will vary from 100 to 120 feet and require the acquisition of nineteen homes, four businesses, one church and two apartment buildings as mentioned previously. The existing footprint of two houses to be acquired between Main and Angier Streets will be completely contained within the widened roadway.
- In regard to appearance impacts, very little visualization of the project was prepared. There is concern that the grade change under the railroad tracks will create a “tunnel effect” and that several concrete retaining walls along the project will not be visually appealing. Due to the length of the exclusive left turn lanes at intersections, the opportunities to provide landscaping in the median will be limited.
- While the project provides 14 foot wide outside lanes to accommodate bicyclists, there is concern that these wide lanes will encourage higher vehicular speeds. The City’s request to provide a three foot bike lane would provide a narrower vehicular travel lane and a defined area for cyclists.
- The length of the widening project is approximately one mile, terminating at the north end at Holloway Street. While the 2030 Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) identifies a new three lane route extending from this point north on new alignment and terminating at Old Oxford/Roxboro, this project is not funded and not even scheduled to be completed in the LRTP until 2030. Therefore, the one mile long widened Alston Avenue would continue to connect to the existing three lane facility at Holloway Street for many years. Any travel time savings from the one mile length of widened Alston Avenue would be minimal.

- Another new roadway that is expected to serve as an alternate route and divert traffic from Alston Avenue is the East End Connector. This project will connect US 70 to NC 147 in East Durham and will provide a new freeway connection between I-85 and NC 147 (via US 70). This project is scheduled for construction in 2012 in the 2007-2013 TIP but has been delayed two years in the draft 2009-2015 TIP. It would seem to make sense to see what impact this project would have on diverting traffic from Alston Avenue before proceeding with the widening of Alston Avenue.
- The Hope VI plan calls for Alston Avenue to become the focal point of the NECD community for non-residential uses such as retail, cultural and religious uses serving the needs of the residents. It states on page 32, "As noted above, the neighborhood center in this area has eroded. If it is to be revived, it must be refocused on the Alston/Main and Alston/Angier Crossings." The report goes on to state that the primary concerns voiced by residents was a lack of a convenient commercial center offering a collection of basic services. The idea was to envision a commercial hub that was pedestrian friendly first and foremost where a supermarket, drugstore, hardware store and farmers market could be located for the neighborhood.
- The Northeast Central Durham Strategic Plan stated: "A state road with traffic implications on a regional basis, it (Alston Avenue) is slated for a major widening project. The portion that extends through NECD is now in the initial planning stages. The form that this widening takes will have major implications for the ultimate character of the neighborhoods. Done sensitively and well, it can be a boulevard that joins the community together. Done poorly, it will slice the community and leave an irreparable scar that will forever split the area into two parts."
- These two community driven plans envision a streetscape project that slows down traffic, a celebration of the heritage and culture of the neighborhood, sidewalks with provisions for decorative design and materials, great street making for economic development and quality of life, making the pedestrian feel safe and in close proximity to the other side of the street, decorative lighting that promotes place making and safety, landscaping that entices community gathering and socialization, street furnishings such as trash receptacles and benches, public access to the street, and street pavements and striping among other amenities.
- This vision is about "Place Making" and a neighborhood "Main St." versus the current vision of building a highway to move regional traffic. Building a highway to move regional traffic will not promote quality community economic development since neighborhood residents will not feel safe or comfortable engaging the street and most commerce that may be attracted to the street will serve the needs of the regional traffic (gas stations, for example). If done the other way – true Place Making – residents will be engaged to the street and it will be much easier to attract quality of life community economic development such as grocery stores, drugstores, hardware stores and farmers markets because they will see a market or demand created by the neighborhood resident. The stores will also benefit from the regional traffic but this will be an ancillary benefit to the location. The point is what gets the emphasis. It would also seem a shame to spend so much public and private resources on rebuilding the housing stock of the NECD community and then miss the only

opportunity to rebuild the commercial center for the neighborhood and ignore two community driven planning documents that have been approved by Council.

- Finally, this “Place Making” approach is exactly what the City is pursuing now for its targeted neighborhood commercial districts. OEWD and Public Works is currently in the process of engaging the public to plan mini “Main St.” for Old Five Points, East Main St., Angier and Driver, West Chapel Hill St. and the Fayetteville Corridor. We have hired Streetscape Design Firms that have an expertise in designing downtown and neighborhood commercial district streetscape projects that cater to the pedestrian and the neighborhood resident and not to the vehicle. The downtown streetscape project is a perfect example of how good design matters to economic development.

For the aforementioned reasons staff does not support the widening of Alston Avenue as currently proposed. We recognize, however, that certain safety and operational improvements along Alston Avenue are needed and should be made. We also support additional streetscape improvements along Alston Avenue. If Council so desires, with additional funding the Alston Avenue corridor could be added to the aforementioned process of engaging the public to plan a “Main St” for this corridor. We would recommend that the funds currently programmed for the Alston Avenue widening project instead be used to provide safety, operational and streetscape improvements along Alston Avenue and that any remaining funds be reallocated to other high priority roadway improvement projects in Durham.