

**DURHAM • CHAPEL HILL • CARRBORO**  
**METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION**

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**March 23, 2022**

TO: Technical Committee (TC), DCHC MPO  
 FROM: Andy Henry, Transportation Planner  
 SUBJECT: Finish the US 15-501 Corridor Study

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**Summary**

In November 2020, the DCHC MPO Board did not approve the draft US 15-501 Corridor Study and directed staff to work with stakeholders to develop a plan that is acceptable to the stakeholders and meets the goals developed in the 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) process. In March 2021, staff published a work statement for a consultant to finish the plan but did not receive any bids. The low project budget, \$50,000, was a principal reason for not receiving bids. The MPO did not have the staff resources to move the project forward at that time.

Staff recommends increasing the project budget to \$150,000 and using a more flexible procurement process that will allow the MPO to work out a project scope with a qualified consultant. This memorandum provides the project background, identifies issues and alternatives for discussion, and recommends steps to move forward.

**What this Action Accomplishes**

The US 15-501 corridor is among the most important travel corridors in the MPO and Triangle area. A guide to develop projects in this corridor is critical to ensure that a coordinated, multimodal transportation network is built. A process and approved corridor study in the US 15-501 corridor supports all of the DCHC MPO goals, most notably those goals related to connecting people and places, managing congestion, maintaining system reliability, and ensuring access to multimodal transportation.

**Background**

The US 15-501 Corridor Study was intended to coordinate land use and transportation planning, and to identify and guide the development of multimodal transportation projects for the DCHC MPO's long-range plans and TIP (Transportation Improvement Program), and for the NCDOT project development process. The project corridor is along US 15-501 from the Blue Hill District in Chapel Hill (Ephesus Church Road), through the I-40 interchange, through the old South Square area in Durham, terminating at University Drive.

The key events and dates of the previous study are:

- March 2018 – WSP (consultant) begins US 15-501 Corridor Study.
- February 2019 – Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit suspended. Light Rail was a major study assumption for the central section of the corridor.
- May 2019 – DCHC MPO decides to extend supplemental agreement to WSP to continue study and assume high capacity transit in most of corridor.
- September 2020 – DCHC MPO releases full report, summary report and conceptual design for public comment.
- November 2020 – DCHC MPO Board directs staff to adjust the plan so that it better supports the MPO's Goals and better prioritizes multimodal transportation.
- March 2021 – DCHC MPO does not receive any bids from consultants in response to proposal to finish US 15-501 Corridor Study. MPO staff is shortstaffed and not able to dedicate time to move project forward.

In September 2020, the DCHC MPO released the final US 15-501 Corridor Study (*Reimagining 15-501*) for public comment. A copy of the full report, summary report and conceptual design can be found on the [project website](#). The public comments at the October 2020 public hearing did not support the final plan – see pages 3-5 in the DCHC MPO October 2020 [meeting minutes](#). At their November 2020 meeting, the MPO Board stated that the Study's proposed transportation system for the Chapel Hill segment and the I-40/US 15-501 quadrant area did not meet the MPO's goals and the interests of several people who provided comments to the Board concerning the final Study. In summary, the Board concluded that the design of the Chapel Hill segment favored automobile travel over that of bicyclists and pedestrians, and the sole interchange proposed for the quadrant area provided inadequate access to the Patterson Place and New Hope Commons developments. In addition, resolution on connectivity between New Hope Commons and Patterson Place, and between New Hope Commons and Eastowne, could not be reached.

In an effort to complete the Study, the DCHC MPO released a [Request for Interest](#) (RFI) to approximately 15 transportation and public works consulting firms on the DCHC MPO on-call master agreement in February 2021. The RFI, budgeted at \$50,000, asked the consultant to:

1. Conduct stakeholder groups for the Chapel Hill segment and for the I-40/US 15-501 quadrant area.
2. Identify transportation needs that are not met by the proposed US 15-501 Corridor Study.
3. Develop solutions through facilitated meetings to identify proposed solutions.
4. Conduct public input through an open house meeting and public hearing.
5. Incorporate the solutions into the final US 15-501 Corridor Study report, summary report, and conceptual design.

The MPO did not receive any bids. An informal survey with the master agreement firms revealed some of the reasons:

- Insufficient budget.
- Conflict of interest with other public and private projects in the corridor.
- Bicycle and pedestrian expertise is emphasized in the RFI but the firm does not specialize in that area, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage.
- Reluctance to give second opinion to previous consultant work.
- Reservations about getting involved in a controversial project among NCDOT, MPO and local jurisdictions.
- Uncertainty about expected end product (i.e., level of detailed changes to current draft report and conceptual design).
- Inadequate time to coordinate with subcontractors, e.g., bike/ped specialists.

### **Issues**

There are a few issues that need to be discussed and resolved for this project to move forward:

1. *Issue* – The MPO wants to be sure that any future approved US 15-501 Corridor Study will produce subsequent projects and designs that create the desired multimodal transportation system. *Resolution* – Ensure that the conceptual design, roadway cross-sections and report provide the information needed for local development review and for NCDOT to develop an acceptable set of alternatives in the project development phase. Ensure that NCDOT and local jurisdiction staff are involved.
2. *Issue* – The MPO wants to be sure that the proposed Study has local community support. *Resolution* – Ensure that community groups and advocates, property owners and neighbors are well represented in the stakeholder groups who will meet to develop the plan.
3. *Issue* – The Durham County Transit Plan and Orange County Transit Plan are expected to be drafted or approved in summer 2021. Will those plans have sufficient detail to permit the incorporation of detailed transit services, facilities, and infrastructure into the US 15-501 Corridor Study? *Resolution* – If more detail is needed, e.g., the location and type of a transit station along US 15-501, additional transit planning will need to be added to the US 15-501 Corridor Study process. And, that transit planning might need to be extended to the US 15-501/S. Columbia St. interchange.
4. *Issue* – There is a draft US 15-501 Corridor Study that consists of a conceptual design, summary report, and full report. It will be difficult to incorporate new information and products from segments 1 and 2 into this existing draft report in which the segment 3 and 4 information does not need to be updated. *Resolution* – Staff will determine whether it is best to incorporate the new segment 1 and 2 information into the existing draft report, or create two separate reports, i.e., segment 1 and 2 plan, and segment 3 and 4 plan.

## **Alternatives**

There are a few alternatives to hiring a consultant to finish the Study:

1. *Finish the Study* – Finish the public engagement and recommendations for segment 1 (Chapel Hill) and segment 2 (I-40 to US 15-501 bypass).
2. *Finish the Study in segments* – The MPO can schedule to finish the study in three separate increments that are completed one at a time, i.e., segment 1 (Chapel Hill); segment 2 (quadrant area only; segments 3 and 4 (New Hope Creek to University Drive).
3. *Do not finish the Study* – The MPO can let the 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) and local plans direct the future development, transportation facilities and transportation design along the US 15-501 corridor.
4. *Do not finish the Study, but approve part of the Study* – The MPO can approve the part of the draft Study that addresses segments 3 and 4, i.e., from the US 15-501 Bypass to University Drive.

Staff recommends option 1. The details for completion of this option are shown below.

## **Recommendation**

Staff recommends developing a work statement that clearly defines the goals, objectives, and parameters for a future study to be done by a consultant. The key tasks of the work statement will likely include:

1. Conduct a separate meeting with each of three different stakeholder groups to identify and understand the issues that stakeholders have with the draft Corridor Study. The stakeholder groups will be: segment 1 (i.e., Chapel Hill segment); I-40/US 15-501 quadrant area; and, segments 2, 3 and 4. Ensure that low-income and people of color are effectively represented in the stakeholder groups.
2. Conduct one or more meetings with each stakeholder group to identify proposed solutions to the unmet transportation needs and issues that were identified in the previous issues meeting. The format could be a charrette and could occur over multiple days, if needed.
3. Develop a draft conceptual design for segment 1, the I-40/US 15-501 quadrant area, and segments 2, 3, and 4 based on information from the stakeholder meetings, and update the summary and full report. Present the draft conceptual design and summary and full report to the Project Steering Committee (PSC), the DCHC MPO Technical Committee, and finally to the DCHC MPO Board.
4. The Durham County Transit Plan and Orange County Transit Plan are expected to be drafted or approved in summer 2021. Incorporate transit services, facilities, and infrastructure from those plans into the US 15-501 Corridor Study.
5. MPO Board release conceptual design, summary report, and full report for public engagement activities to get community feedback.
6. Incorporate design and report into final documents, and MPO Board approve final documents.

In addition, staff recommends a Project Steering Committee meeting to bring them up-to-date and receive guidance on the questions posed in the Issues and Alternatives sections above.

Once the Work Statement is completed, it can be used as the scope for a new corridor study that will focus on transit needs within the corridor. The MPO will use a more flexible procurement process to select and meet with interested firms to discuss MPO needs and outline scope and budget. The MPO will use the Durham and Orange County transit plans as input for the scope of the project. The MPO's FY 2022-2023 UPWP (Unified Planning Work Program) budgets \$150,000 for this contract.