



Durham–Chapel Hill–Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization

Member Organizations: Town of Carrboro, Town of Chapel Hill, Chatham County, City of Durham, Durham County, Town of Hillsborough, NC Department of Transportation, Orange County, GoTriangle

February 27, 2017

Mr. Van Argabright
Manager, STIP, Feasibility Studies, and Strategic Prioritization
N.C. Department of Transportation
1534 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1534

Dear Mr. Argabright:

The Draft FY2020-29 State Transportation Improvement Plan (Draft STIP) was released by the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) on January 10, 2019. Over the last two months staff from the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization (DCHC) and its member jurisdictions have reviewed the Draft STIP. On February 27, 2019, the DCHC Technical Committee (TC) and Board generated and reviewed comments and questions for NCDOT. These comments are being provided to you and your staff prior to the one-on-one meeting scheduled for March 13, 2019. The first set of comments and questions are general and programmatic in nature, the second set regard particular projects that are programmed in the Draft STIP.

GENERAL COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Normalization within the Strategic Transportation Investments (STI) Process

DCHC supports a quantitative, collaborative, and transparent process for prioritizing transportation funding, and believes that the STI process generally achieves this goal. Furthermore, DCHC understands that the parameters of the STI law in large part dictate which projects are eventually funded in the STIP. However, normalization is one part of the funding formula that is set in NCDOT policy, and not within the STI law.

Normalization needs to accommodate varying shares of highway and non-highway funding across the State, and those shares will vary depending on the needs and development patterns of each MPO and RPO. In DCHC's recently adopted 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), 58 percent of funding is projected for highway projects, and 42 percent for non-highway projects. The outcome of the Draft STIP for DCHC is a two-thirds/one-third split between highway and non-highway projects. While this is certainly closer to the funding split desired by the DCHC Board through the MTP, and due largely to the inclusion of the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project, the STI normalization process still affects DCHC's ability to invest according to our long-range

vision. DCHC remains concerned that normalization is not flexible enough to adequately address different needs across the State.

Comments Regarding Bicycle and Pedestrian Projects

DCHC appreciates the work that NCDOT is currently doing on updating its Complete Streets policy. While work is ongoing on this project, one major issue for local governments that has yet to be addressed is the mismatch between the current implementation of the Complete Streets policy and NCDOT funding policies for bicycle and pedestrian improvements. For example, the Complete Streets policy often recommends a sidepath or multi-use path for bicycle and pedestrian accommodations on major highways, but during implementation of a highway project that sidepath is considered a betterment, and must be paid for fully by the local government. Conversely, while bicycle lanes are more expensive and require NCDOT to provide maintenance, they are less expensive to local governments because NCDOT will provide 100 percent of the funding for them. Therefore, one major change that should come out of the Complete Streets policy work is for NCDOT to provide funding for sidepaths that are typically less expensive and will be maintained by the local government. This policy alignment will ensure that funding of facilities incentivizes and supports the most appropriate facility.

The NCDOT Complete Streets policy should also apply to new bridges and bridge replacement in urbanized areas. Currently, NCDOT will not provide bicycle or pedestrian accommodations on a bridge unless curb and gutter currently extends to the bridge, regardless of if there are plans to extend curb and gutter to the bridge, or if bicycle and pedestrian facilities exist approaching the bridge without curb and gutter.

DCHC recommends that the cost share for sidewalks be eliminated. The current cost share requirement for sidewalks as a part of highway projects, based on population, has led to difficult financial demands for local governments in growing areas like the Triangle, where there are many major highway projects underway at once. This financial burden makes it difficult for municipalities to complete the standalone bicycle and pedestrian projects they have been awarded due to limited budgets for such projects.

All bicycle and pedestrian projects in the Draft 2020-2029 STIP should be programmed with ROW in the first five years of the STIP so that they can be committed projects. With a 20 percent local match required for projects with federal funding, local governments find it difficult to budget the local match in their Capital Improvements Plans (CIPs) for projects that will need to be rescored and have a possibility of losing federal funding.

Under current procedures, municipal agreements for bicycle and pedestrian projects are locked into a project cost without the benefit of project design. Project costs are best estimated at the 65 percent design stage. DCHC has found that the cost estimates, prepared using the NCDOT cost estimation tool, for bicycle and pedestrian projects for the past three SPOT cycles has greatly underestimated the costs for these projects. While DCHC and its communities greatly appreciate the assistance that NCDOT has provided in

identifying additional funding for cost increases for bicycle and pedestrian projects, this has been done in an informal manner to date. DCHC would like to work with NCDOT to develop a more formal process for addressing cost increases on bicycle and pedestrian projects.

Accommodate Future Commuter Rail in Grade Separation Projects

There are two grade separation projects currently in the Draft FY2018-27 STIP (described below under specific projects) along the North Carolina Railroad corridor. This corridor is shown in the DCHC and CAMPO Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) as providing future commuter rail service. These grade separation projects need to be built to accommodate commuter rail as well as freight service between Durham and Raleigh. Project funding in the Draft STIP needs to be adequate for this scope.

Greater Flexibility for FAST Act Freight Program

The Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act includes a program that specifically targets funding for freight projects. However, under the current STI system that funding is spent according to the formula and not necessarily targeted to freight projects to which it is designed. DCHC recommends that NCDOT look at ways of separating these funds from the STI formula.

SPECIFIC PROJECT-RELATED COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Durham County

EB-5720 R. Kelly Bryant Bridge Trail

- As addressed in the general comments, this project originally funded through P3.0 has seen major cost increases as it moves through the design process. DCHC appreciates the cooperation with NCDOT on identifying additional funds to cover rising costs, and would like to work with NCDOT on formalizing this process in the future.

EB-5834 NC 157 (Guess Road) Sidewalks

- All phases of this project can be delayed four years to free up funding in the first five years of the STIP and to accommodate anticipated future cost increases.

EB-5835 NC 55 Sidewalks

- All phases of this project can be delayed two years to free up funding in the first five years of the STIP and to accommodate anticipated future cost increases.

EB-5837 Third Fork Creek Trail

- As addressed in the general comments, this project originally funded through P3.0 has seen major cost increases as it moves through the design process. DCHC appreciates the cooperation with NCDOT on identifying additional funds to cover rising costs, and would like to work with NCDOT on formalizing this process in the future.

EB-5904 Duke Belt Line Trail

- The Construction phase of this project can be delayed two years to match current delivery schedule and to accommodate anticipated future cost increases.

P-5706 Eastern Durham Siding and Grade Separation

- This grade separation project needs to be built to accommodate all potential track expansion projects including tracks that may be needed for commuter rail service between Durham and Raleigh. The Draft STIP funding needs to be adequate for this greater scope

P-5717 Cornwallis Road Grade Separation

- This grade separation project needs to be built to accommodate all potential track expansion projects including tracks that may be needed for commuter rail service between Durham and Raleigh. The Draft STIP funding needs to be adequate for this greater scope.

Orange County

EB-5994 NC 54 Multiuse Path in Carrboro

- This project should be accelerated by two years so that ROW is in FY24 and this becomes a committed project. This will allow the Town of Carrboro to budget the local match in its CIP.

EB-5998 Fordham Boulevard Multiuse Paths

- This project should be accelerated by four years so that the Construction phase is in FY24 and this becomes a committed project. This will allow the Town of Chapel Hill to budget the local match in its CIP.

U-5304 US 15-501 Upgrade

- The Draft STIP supplies funding in the Developmental Program for Breaks B, D, E, and F of this project. The Town of Chapel Hill has concerns about construction of an interchange at Manning Drive (Break E), particularly since it is classified as a Statewide Mobility project and therefore was scored with no local input. Additionally, feasibility studies currently being conducted on these segments lean towards use of a superstreet design. The Town of Chapel Hill has concerns with bicycle and pedestrian accommodations within a superstreet, and feels there is a need for further evaluation of the impacts a superstreet would have on these areas.

Chatham County

U-6192 US 15/501 Conversion to Synchronized Street

- This project is an example of one where the Complete Streets policy would recommend a multi-use path, yet only bicycle lanes would be paid for by NCDOT.

Thank you for your time and attention to these matters. I look forward to addressing these issues with your staff next month.

Sincerely,

Felix Nwoko, Manager
DCHC MPO

cc: Mike Stanley, PE, STIP Unit
Richard Lakata, PE, STIP Unit
Rupal Desai, PE, STIP Unit
Jamal Alavi, PE, Manager, Transportation Planning Division
Julie Bogle, PE, Transportation Planning Division
Hanna Cockburn, AICP, Director, Bicycle and Pedestrian Division
Jason Orthner, PE, Director, Rail Division
Joey Hopkins, PE, Division 5 Engineer
Richard Hancock, PE, Division 5 Deputy Engineer
David Keilson, PE, Division 5 Planning Engineer
Mike Mills, PE, Division 7 Engineer
Pat Wilson, PE, Division 7 Deputy Engineer
Ed Lewis, PE, Division 7 Planning Engineer
Brandon Jones, PE, Division 8 Engineer
Bryan Kluchar, PE, Division 8 Planning Engineer