

Appendix I – Public Hearing Comments

Durham Traffic Separation Study
Public Hearing Comment Summary
November 2013

A public hearing was held for the Durham Traffic Separation Study on October 21, 2013. The hearing was part of the Durham City Council Meeting (agenda item #9). The City Council Meeting began at 7:00 p.m., located in Council Chambers at Durham City Hall, 101 City Hall Plaza, Durham. Ten people spoke at the public hearing, six of whom represented the Durham Area Designers. Written comments were received from 10 citizens in addition to written submittals from the Durham Area Designers and the Durham City-County Planning Department. All comments are summarized below, with responses provided for each.

Verbal Comments

Speaker List:

- Terry Rekeweg
- Geoff Durham
- Dan Jewel
- Randy Hester
- Eric Heidt
- Robyn Heeks
- Doug Osborn
- Deputy County Manager Lee Worsley
- Gwen Silver
- James Chavis
- Robyn Heeks (additional comments)

COMMENTS REQUESTING ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS OR CHANGES TO ALTERNATIVES

Terry Rekeweg

Mr. Rekeweg proposed a revision to the Durham-Orange Light Rail projects. Although he noted that this request is not directly related to the Traffic Separation Study, he felt it was relevant to the discussion, and provided Council with a handout entitled “Proposed Revised Alignment – Summary of Improvements.”

Response: Although these suggestions are outside the scope of the TSS they were accepted by the City of Durham staff for consideration toward other projects.

Geoff Durham

Mr. Durham, representing Downtown Durham, Inc. (DDI), stated that DDI fully supports the short-term alternatives and the identification of funding to continue working on low cost upgrades which would improve the safety and aesthetics of the downtown crossings. He agreed that the Blackwell, Mangum, and Roxboro grade separations should be the top priority long-term project, but requested the project be extended to also include Dillard, Ramseur, and Duke Streets. He feels Dillard Street will continue to be important for connectivity as the area develops, and opposes closing the crossing. He said that DDI supports moving forward by adopting the TSS in order to be in a position to pursue further funding, but without necessarily endorsing the specific proposed long-term alternatives.

Response: The TSS report (pages ES-2, C-1, E-2, and H-21) now notes that alternatives at Dillard Street should be considered at the same time that alternatives at Blackwell/Corcoran Street to Roxboro Street are considered. Ramseur and Duke Streets will continue to be analyzed separately.

Dan Jewell

Mr. Jewell, representing Durham Area Designers (DAD), referenced work done by DAD on the proposed downtown alternatives. He said that more detailed study is needed to understand the impacts of the proposed grade separations and closings on aspects such as aesthetics, the pedestrian experience, and effects on local businesses, economics, and social justice issues.

Response: Once a project is selected to be carried forward by the City and/or NCDOT, more detailed design and analysis will be required. Projects will progress as funding becomes available. For any project selected, a “No Build” alternative will be considered as one of the options.

Randy Hester

Mr. Hester, representing DAD, felt that the proposed grade separation will worsen vehicular and pedestrian travel downtown. He showed Council an illustration that would create a concrete channel along Main and Blackwell/Ramseur Streets and retaining walls along Pettigrew and Vivian Streets. He asked Council to reject this proposal and instead study new alternatives.

Response: The graphic included in the TSS for these crossings is a conceptual-level design, and is only one potential design. The purpose of the TSS is to demonstrate which alternatives are feasible and practicable. If the downtown crossings are selected for more detailed study, other designs will also be considered, including a “No-Build” alternative.

Eric Heidt

Mr. Heidt, representing DAD, stated support for the short-term and mid-term alternatives in the TSS. However, he felt that the TSS did not adequately study the impacts of the long-term alternatives, and more analysis of new alternatives is needed.

Response: The purpose of the TSS is to consider the feasibility of a range of alternatives at the study crossings. Although preliminary impacts were discussed, it does not fully study the impacts of the long-term alternatives. Once a project is selected to be carried forward by the City and/or NCDOT and funding becomes available, more detailed design and analysis will be undertaken.

Robyn Heeks

Ms. Heeks, representing DAD, said that the TSS did not clearly define the problem that it seeks to solve, and therefore does not adequately present an explanation of why the proposed solutions are appropriate. She said that the study neglects other factors that influence safety and congestion such as streetscape design, wayfinding, and perceptions of safety, and may create new problems such as pedestrian-inhospitable tunnels, underpasses, and closures; a barrier through the city; scale issues between retaining walls/bridge structures and streetscape/homes; and urban design issues where walls block sight lines that help connect and unify the city. She suggested that alternative solutions should be considered, and that if grade separations are needed, that they be studied on a landscaped level. She offered solutions such as elevated bio-duct and rail channels.

Response: The purpose of the TSS is to consider the feasibility of a range of alternatives at the study crossings. Although preliminary impacts were discussed, it does not fully study the impacts of the long-term alternatives. Once a project is selected to be carried forward by the City and/or NCDOT, more detailed design and analysis will be undertaken.

Deputy County Manager Lee Worsley

Mr. Worsley was concerned with the impact of the proposed alternatives on County governmental operations. He said that closing crossings would have an impact on EMS response time and services. He suggested that the project team meet with his staff to discuss the location of EMS stations and routes. He also was concerned with closing the Dillard Street crossing because it is adjacent to the County’s General Services Department which provides building and grounds maintenance services for all County buildings. The Dillard Street crossing is an important connection between the Human Services Building, General Services, and the Court House as well as other major County facilities in the area.

Response: Several EMS and County planning staff attended stakeholder meetings throughout the process, including David Addison (City of Durham Police), Bruce Pagan, Jr. (City of Durham Fire), Michael Webb (Durham County Emergency Management), and Steve Medlin (Durham City/County Planning). Four stakeholder meetings were held – November 2011, April 2012, January 2013, and May 2013. In addition, Jeff Batten (Durham County Fire Marshal) and Mike Ruffin (Durham County Manager) were included on correspondence for this project. Additional studies of the Dillard Street crossing would be conducted once the project is approved and funding is identified. The closing of any at-grade crossing will require additional detailed study and evaluation, including impacts to emergency response routes and EMS facilities. This will require input from City and County emergency responders.

James Chavis

Mr. Chavis was concerned that closing crossings in his area would cause congestion, and asked what the benefits were of closing the streets. He asked Council to postpone this study and look for alternate solutions that would not negatively impact pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Response: The benefit of closing railroad crossings is to improve safety for vehicles and trains by eliminating the potential conflict point. Mitigation projects are planned in this area with the crossing closures which should improve existing conditions at the adjacent crossings. Further evaluation of these alternatives and the associated mitigation projects will be conducted prior to any crossings being closed.

COMMENTS OPPOSED TO THE PROJECT

Doug Osborn

Mr. Osborn, representing CDJ Properties, LLC, spoke against closing the Dillard Street crossing. He felt this will put a damper on downtown redevelopment and pedestrian travel.

Response: The TSS report (pages ES-2, C-1, E-2, and H-21) now notes that alternatives at Dillard Street should be considered at the same time that alternatives at Blackwell/Corcoran Street to Roxboro Street are considered. When this grouping of crossings is progressed for further study, detailed analysis of the access and development impacts will be performed.

Gwen Silver

Ms. Silver opposed closing any railroad crossings in East Durham, since doing so may divide the already struggling community. She mentioned that several other studies have been done of the Northeast Central Durham area.

Response:

Mitigation projects are planned in this area with the crossing closures which should improve existing conditions at the adjacent crossings. Further evaluation of these alternatives and the associated mitigation projects will be conducted prior to any crossings being closed.

Written Comments

List of Citizens Providing Written Comments:

- Owen Evans
- Kenneth Hamm
- Ernest Miles
- John Tallmadge
- Dan Jewell, on behalf of the Durham Area Designers
- Steven Medlin, on behalf of the Durham City-County Planning Department
- Dan Welch
- John Schelp
- Galia Goodman
- Eric Heidt
- Jan Martell
- Natalie Spring

COMMENTS REQUESTING ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS OR CHANGES TO ALTERNATIVES

Owen Evans

Mr. Evans agrees with a grade separation at Blackwell, Mangum, and Roxboro Streets. He suggests extending the solution to also include Chapel Hill, Duke, and Gregson Streets. Chapel Hill and Gregson Streets have low clearance, and Duke Street is a busy crossing. He suggests modifying the railroad to maintain its existing elevation until the end of the platforms at the Durham Amtrak Station, gradually descending from there to Blackwell Street and then to the grade proposed at Blackwell Street. This has the benefit of raising the clearance over Chapel Hill and Gregson Streets, and also would require Duke Street to be lowered less than shown in the eliminated alternatives.

Response: This alternative may be considered during the next design phase if the Blackwell/Corcoran, Mangum, and Roxboro Street crossings are carried forward for detailed study.

Kenneth Hamm

Mr. Hamm had several comments related to the Glover Road proposal. He feels that project is not needed with the addition of the East End Connector. He is concerned about traffic on Glover Road because of limited sight distance near Glover and Crafton. He suggests closing the crossing at Glover Road, improve and extend roads north to Ellis Road and south to Wrenn Road, and grade separate Wrenn Road.

Response: This alternative may be considered during the next design phase if the Glover and Ellis Road crossings are carried forward for detailed study.

Ernest Miles

Mr. Miles asked if some funds could be made available to address a hazard at the Ellis Road (East) railroad crossing. He said that the recently added reflective stripes, reflectors, and traffic lights are a valuable improvement. However, he feels that the grade needs to be raised on both sides of the railroad tracks to eliminate the hump at the crossing, which is a hazard to drivers, especially at night. In previous conversations with NCDOT, he was told this would be addressed in the future. He asked if this could be included in the TSS as a short-term solution.

He also asked if the study included the slow speed of the traffic and delays due to the school and train schedules. He said that traffic volumes may also show a need for more lanes across the railroad tracks.

Response: This crossing is currently designated as “humped” in the NCDOT database. Improving the grade of this crossing could be completed by the Department separate from the recommendations in the TSS when and if maintenance funds are available. The analysis in the TSS was based on traffic volumes, which are not dependent on travel speed. A traffic forecast will be done as part of the next phase of design if this crossing is selected for detailed study.

John Tallmadge

Mr. Tallmadge provided a written comment, concepts from the City of Durham’s draft Downtown Open Space Plan, and a description of a Ramseur Street Sculpture Trail Proposal. He supports the grade separation of Blackwell and Mangum Streets, but suggests that the next phase of project design include extensive community input, that the design potentially include a greenway, and that it consider an alternative that would only allow bikers and pedestrians under the bridge at Blackwell Street. He said that unless the existing bridges over Chapel Hill Street become a safety hazard, that they be preserved so that they may in the future be used as a bike/pedestrian trail. He supports the near-term safety improvements and sidewalks improvements at all crossings. Finally, he does not support the closings of Dillard Street, Ramseur Street, or Plum Street until community-supported separations can be constructed for pedestrians and bikers.

Response: These alternatives may be considered during the next design phase if the Blackwell/Corcoran, Mangum, and Roxboro Street crossings are carried forward for detailed study. The next phase of design will include a detailed impact analysis and public involvement program.

Dan Jewell, on behalf of the Durham Area Designers

The Durham Area Designers provided a detailed review of the TSS report, including specific suggestions for wording and information provided (see comment form for more information). Most of their comments will be addressed during the next phase of planning and design (likely a National Environmental Policy Act document). Several of their comments were related to NCDOT’s typical TSS analysis process, such as how crash data is collected or how exposure index is calculated.

In general, they suggested that a section be added to the process describing the process, its history, how it will be used going forward, and how it fits into other long-term plans for the city. They said that the study needs to more clearly and objectively state the problem it seeks to solve and the assumptions used in the selection of some alternatives over others. The letter from the Durham Area Designers provided several specific examples of points to be clarified on this topic. They felt the study needs to more clearly and repeatedly indicate that the designs shown are only examples of what is possible, not what is appropriate. This would clarify that endorsement of the study would not imply endorsement of any particular set of solutions, and that future studies will evaluate alternatives in more detail. They also felt that the study should more clearly state that “no build” would be considered in future alternatives analyses. They said that the study does not adequately support the benefit of road closing, and therefore feels that no road closures should be included in the final TSS. Finally, the study should do a closer analysis of low impact and low cost opportunities such as adapting existing grade separations to handle more traffic and improving existing streets in the context of other long-term plans.

The written comment also included the verbal statements made by several members of the Durham Area Designers during the public hearing.

Response: A paragraph has been added to the Executive Summary of the TSS Report (the first paragraph in the final report) to clarify the TSS process and how it will be used going forward. The specific comments regarding analysis methodologies may be addressed in the next phase of design for the alternatives that are selected to be carried forward for detailed study.

Steven Medlin, on behalf of the Durham City-County Planning Department

The Planning Department provided comments on the TSS Report, including specific suggestions for designs. The comments provided input on impacts for many of the alternatives, and suggested alternative solutions at several crossings. At Neal Road, the long-term solution could impact the adjacent athletic fields and storm water pond. At N. Lasalle Street, the retaining walls in the long-term solution would block several entrances to several businesses. At W. Pettigrew Street, the long-term solution would affect entrances to several businesses and could be mitigated by constructing a new access road adjacent to NC 147. At Chapel Hill Street, the steel trestle that is proposed to be removed should instead be considered for use as a pedestrian overpass. At Blackwell/Corcoran and Mangum Streets, additional studies are needed to address potential impacts, including the following issues: the proposed grade on Blackwell/Corcoran Street would be difficult for ADA access; the visual connection between downtown and the ATC would be reduced by the proposed bridge and walls; the streetscape would be imposing to pedestrians because of the walls; the functionality of adjacent properties would be impacted; adjacent properties could be impaired by road and wall work; and the addition of a decorative fence along Ramseur Street would be a welcome addition. At Roxboro Street, redesign of the bridge is recommended to retain as much of the existing structure for aesthetic and historic reasons as feasible. At Dillard Street, closing the crossings would have the following potential impacts: diminish potential redevelopment and pedestrian connections. At Fayetteville Street, the proposed re-grading will make the streets steeper and create more barriers for pedestrians; relocate approximately a dozen existing businesses and residences; and result in a large area of unusable parcels between NC 147 and Ramseur Street. At Ramseur and Grant Streets, closing the crossing would sever the direct connection to downtown under NC 147. At Plum Street, closing the crossing would sever a north-south connection to and from neighborhoods and Durham Green Flea Market; concrete trucks would be diverted through a more residential area; and there are potential security concerns from the proposed pedestrian path to the light rail station location behind industrial parcels and the proposed underpass to the light rail station. At Briggs-Guthrie Avenue, the proposed connection would greatly enhance the connections between north and south across the tracks, would improve the area by connecting Angier Avenue to NC 147, and would raise the value of this area and support the economic development of East Durham.

Response: The suggested alternatives may be considered during the next design phase. The specific impacts described will be taken into account as part of the detailed design process.

COMMENTS SUPPORTING THE PROJECT

Dan Welch

Mr. Welch expressed appreciation that the originally proposed alternatives to grade separate Swift Avenue and 15th Street have been eliminated.

Response: Thank you for your comment.

John Schelp

Mr. Schelp expressed appreciation that the originally proposed alternatives to grade separate Swift Avenue and 15th Street have been eliminated.

Response: Thank you for your comment.

Galia Goodman

Ms. Goodman wrote to say thank you for eliminating the overpass option. She did not specify which alternative she was referencing.

Response: Thank you for your comment.

Eric Heidt

Mr. Heidt wrote to say thank you for the work done on the Durham TSS. He said he had been critical of the earlier version presented to the public, but that this latest version did a good job of answering his critiques.

Response: Thank you for your comment.

COMMENTS OPPOSED TO THE PROJECT

Jan Martell

Ms. Martell feels that this project improves vehicle infrastructure and safety at the expense of livability and human-scale architecture.

Response: Thank you for your comment. More detailed analysis of impacts and connectivity will be conducted in subsequent phases of the project.

Natalie Spring

Ms. Spring opposes closing the Dillard Street crossing. She feels that more connectivity is needed with the addition of the new courthouse, the Health Department, and ATC/DPAC.

Response: More detailed analysis of impacts and connectivity will be conducted in subsequent phases of the project. Once selected for progression, the evaluation will include a No-Build alternative.