

## **Review of Scott Shuford's evaluation of I-26 Connector alternatives submitted to Buncombe County**

**--by Dr. David A Johnson, FAICP, 1/6/09**

It was generous of Scott Shuford, a local planning consultant, to offer gratis Buncombe County his critique of Alternate 4B for the I-26 connector, a critique that seems to have swayed our local County officials to a rush to judgement in a split vote to endorse Alternative 3. Permit me now as a professional planner and Asheville resident to offer, gratis a critique of Mr. Shuford's critique.

Mr. Shuford's analysis appears incomplete in a number of aspects. He evaluates on the basis of only six criteria, (which are not listed in any particular order of priority):

"Impact on Westgate  
Impact on Patton Avenue  
Impact on Hillcrest  
Impact on Montford/Riverside Cemetery  
Cost impact comparisons  
Bridge impact comparisons"

There are other criteria and issues that Mr. Shuford should have considered:

- \*Benefits to the community that would accrue from each of the alternatives. Shuford uses only costs as a criterion. Benefit/cost analysis obviously requires weighing both benefits and costs.
- \*Conformity of the several alternatives to the officially adopted Asheville 2025 Plan (presumably Shuford knows about the legal status of this plan since he is a former planning director).
- \*Clear desire of the community to separate local and Interstate traffic on Patton Avenue. Alternatives 4 and 4B separate local and Interstate traffic. Alternatives 2 and 3 do not.
- \*Resolution of the traffic conflicts and safety problems on the east side of the French Broad at the Smoky Park Bridge. Alternatives 4 and 4B do a better job of addressing this problem. Alternatives 2 and 3 are less satisfactory.
- \*Adverse Impact on the Burton Neighborhood under Alternate 3. Alternative 4B does not require extensive demolition of this primarily African-American neighborhood.

Now let's look at the individual assessments Shuford makes under his criteria:

Under 4B, Shuford suggests that Westgate will be isolated because I-26 must go over Patton in this alternative. This is not correct. According to Figg Engineers, I-26 can go under Patton in the 4B Alternative.

Again, Shuford suggests that 4B will have greatest impact on Westgate due to scale and elevation. If it passes under Patton, it will not have the suggested impact.

Shuford says that 4B must cross over Patton Avenue and this will mitigate the "boulevard" effect possibility. Again, there is no necessity for I-26 to go over Patton, according to the Figg Consultants. Shuford repeats his assessment in noting that under 4B 11 lanes of highway must pass over Patton. This is mere repetition of his earlier critique. There is no requirement that I-26 must pass over Patton.

Shuford's ideas about impact on the Hillcrest neighborhood are inaccurate. Alternatives 2 and 3, he suggests, will not impact Hillcrest adversely since little construction is slated under these alternatives for the east side of the River. In fact, Hillcrest is today very isolated from the surrounding community by these existing highway ramps. This isolation would be lessened under the 4B and 4 alternatives.

Impact on Riverside Cemetery: Shuford's conclusions regarding noise and visual impacts of the several alternates are debatable. His conclusion that the impacts of 4B are the most adverse is not demonstrable simply from the visual animations provided by NCDOT. All of the alternatives will impact the area in some degree in terms of noise and a new visual presence of highway structures. Only a computer modelling simulation can reveal which of the alternatives will have the most or least noise impact on the cemetery and the Montford neighborhood. It could well be that 4B with its double-deck structure (containing the sound) would have the least impact. And from the Montford neighborhood, it might, by the same token, also have the least visual intrusiveness. It should also be noted that the visual animations presented are those of the NCDOT and are not necessarily the advanced, simpler design that a forward looking engineering firm like Figg might be expected to come up with (see, for example, their designs for the new Dallas freeway).

Construction costs: Here Shuford's analysis is inadequate. The costs as computed by NCDOT range from roughly \$221 million for Alt. 2 to \$425 million for 4B. It should be no surprise that Alternates 2 and 3 are roughly half the listed cost as 4B. They are half the project that 4B is since they are focussed primarily on the West side of the French Broad and require little or no construction on the East side. One can only ask why the cost comparison should be made on the basis of such a partial criterion. Alternates 2 and 3 simply do not address the explicit wishes of the community to separate local and through traffic and to provide a link between Asheville downtown and West Asheville (as the Smoky Park bridge was originally intended to be.) Alternatives 2 and 3 do not reflect the urban design criteria that the community aspires to, which other cities now emphasize, and to which the NCDOT is supposedly committed under their adopted requirement of "sensitivity to contextual design."

One can additionally argue that the costs listed in the NCDOT table, cited by

Shuford, are too high. New construction techniques as noted by Figg engineers, can bring construction costs down for Alternative 4B. Conventional post and beam construction as presented by the NCDOT animations, are less attractive and more expensive than new techniques utilized by Figg and other engineers in other states. NC should adopt these new technologies to save taxpayer money.

Shuford's cost analysis is also flawed because, as I have pointed out earlier, he compares only costs, not benefits. The cheapest alternative is in fact to do nothing. But WNC would be foolish to adopt this alternative simply because it costs nothing. I-26 must be completed and as quickly as possible. But it should also be done with care and with attention to both benefits as well as costs to the State and the community. This isn't rocket science, but simple common sense.

What are those benefits?

4B will resolve the deficiencies in traffic movements on the East side of the River. Alternate 3 leaves the problematic situation as it is.

4B uses significantly less right of way than any of the other alternative, thus reducing acquisition costs.

4B returns significant amounts of valuable land adjacent to Patton Avenue to the tax rolls for use as commercial and residential development and an attractive extension of Asheville's downtown.

4B enables the development of a boulevard and gateway from the west to Asheville's downtown. It also provides improved opportunities for pedestrian, bicycle and transit movements across the Smoky Park Bridge. Shuford's references to "boulevard" opportunities in Alternate 3 are misleading. There are no "boulevard" opportunities implicit in either Alternative 2 or 3.

4B provides opportunities to create connections to the improved riverbanks of the French Broad River from downtown and from West Asheville. Alternatives 2 and 3 offer no such opportunities.

The Alternative 4B presented in NCDOT's animation is not the final word in what a "4B" could or should be. The design can be visually improved over the crude post and beam construction envisioned by NCDOT. This should occur following a careful review of the final Environmental Impact Statement.

To conclude, Shuford's assessment, while accurate in some particulars, falls short of a critical analysis of the relative merits of the four DIES alternatives. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement, when completed later this year, will provide the community with the facts needed to make a final choice of an alternative. Judgments made prior to the availability of the results of the DIES must necessarily be tentative at this point.

Asheville is a very special place, as we all know. It attracts tourists and new residents alike because of its high quality environment and visual attractiveness. These are economic assets as well as visual amenities. Alternative 3 would diminish those qualities. Alternatives 4 and 4B would not. Alternative 3 is a look in the rear view mirror. Alternative 4B looks ahead to what imaginative American cities will look like in the future, and some, like Boston and Portland already do.

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Biographical note: Dr. Johnson has been a professional planner with the the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the National Capital Planning Commission, Washington, DC, and the Regional Plan Association in New York. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on planning. He has taught urban and regional planning for more than thirty years, at five colleges and universities. He is currently Professor Emeritus of Planning at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Dr. Johnson was planner for the award-winning State Capitol Master Plan and Bicentennial Mall in Nashville, Tennessee. In 2004 he was named a Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners. He resides in Asheville and has been advising the Asheville Design Center since its inception in 2007.

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