

PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT **04**

Public Engagement

The Importance of Engagement

Public engagement plays an integral role in any design or study, as its results will impact the daily lives of community members and local businesses. Planning for a community of any size is not as successful as planning **with** the community; meaningful engagement means stronger results, tighter community bonds, and its implementation is harder fought for. Furthermore, engagement provides invaluable feedback to planners, engineers, and designers regarding current conditions and problems that might not be fully understood looking at data alone; the human element and a diversity of perspectives helps to reframe the project team's view of the issues and provide better suggestions for improvement.

In the Hendersonville Road Corridor Study, public engagement featured prominently throughout all four phases of the planning process. Despite a global pandemic restricting interpersonal interaction, public outreach extended through the virtual realm to encourage residents to stay involved, keep up with the project, and see their feedback and conversations realized in the final recommendations of this Study. Without their help, this vision is never defined and never realized.

Impacts of COVID-19

During the development of the Hendersonville Road Corridor Study, our world, nation, and community were struck by the COVID-19 Pandemic, an unprecedented moment in history with profound implications on traditional means of public engagement. Due to the pandemic, our daily routines were brought to a grinding halt. Stay-at-home orders, school and business closures, and working from home became the new normal for North Carolina residents. Social gatherings were restricted with limitations on types of events and attendance, or outright banned, in order to limit the spread of the coronavirus. Large public meetings, such as the project symposia and multi-day design charrette, as well as small gatherings, such as advisory committee meetings and stakeholder interviews,

HEALTH AND SCIENCE

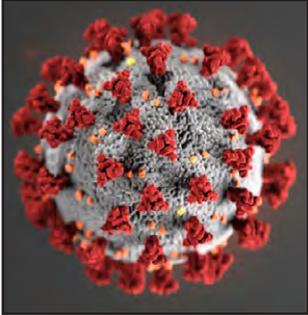
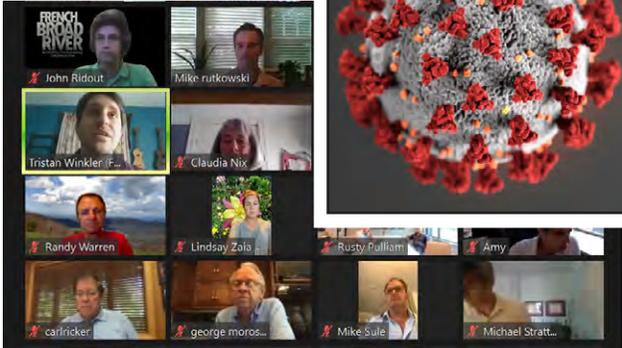
North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper orders residents to stay at home order amid coronavirus outbreak

Hannah Miller

SHARE f t in e

KEY POINTS

- North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper issued a stay-at-home order Friday and closed the state's nonessential businesses in response to t
- The order goes into effect 5:00 pm Monday, but staying at home immediately.
- "It's what we have to do to save lives," he said at

would need to find new formats in order to engage the public meaningfully in the planning process.

Like our community, this study adjusted to the new normal and shifted traditionally in-person means of outreach into the virtual realm. Coupling new online capabilities, such as Zoom cloud meeting technology, with familiar methods of online engagement such as interactive web mapping and surveys, virtual public engagement stepped up to meet the needs of this project. While many of the engagement opportunities described herein were initially intended as in-person meetings, innovation borne out of this challenging time provided a virtual format that nonetheless fostered deep engagement and robust participation from across the community.



Stakeholder Discussions

Advisory Committee

At the beginning of this process, the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization (FBRMPO) worked with the project team to create an advisory committee that would lead the progress of the study. This team was crucial in the development of recommendations and the success of engagement that drove the project. This core group of community members, professionals, agency representatives, and advocates worked closely with the project team throughout the planning process to set the meeting and engagement schedule as well as deadlines. The team met or held conference calls regularly during the process to stay up-to-date and on schedule during all phases of the project.

The Advisory Committee served not only as a project oversight committee, but also as a decision-making entity throughout the life of the project. They helped to provide venues for sharing information, raised and discussed ideas, increased overall community participation, identified other stakeholders for focus groups, fostered communication between the community and the project team, focused and provided resources, helped to set a direction and priorities, and vetted the study recommendations and action plan. They were present every step of the way to provide their local and specialized knowledge to the project team and were consistent in their advocacy for Hendersonville Road.

Advisory Committee

Tristan Winkler

Erica Anderson

John Ridout

Nick Kroncke

French Broad River MPO

Nathan Pennington

Matt Cable

Josh O'Conner

William High

Buncombe County

Todd Okolichany

Vaidila Satvika

Dan Baechtold

David Hazzard

Stacy Mertern

City of Asheville

Brandon Merithew

Daniel Sellers

**North Carolina Department of
Transportation**



Stakeholder Interviews

Following the symposium, stakeholder interviews were held with representatives comprised of community stakeholders, including residents, agency representatives, community leaders, advocates, and elected officials. Meetings were held as a series of one-hour interviews and centered on a single topical theme. Focus group members were identified by members of the advisory committee for inclusion based on their ability to provide different perspectives on the topic at hand representing different facets of the community.

Focus group meetings provided an opportunity to obtain qualitative feedback on targeted topics and areas of interest or concern within the study area. In contrast to the volumes of quantitative data produced during the initial investigation phase of the project, face-to-face interaction with community members in a virtual format allowed the project team to verify data with group perspectives, as well as to supplement the same information with local insight and perspective not captured through data.

Over two days in early June 2020, eight focus groups were conducted, with a total of 36 attendees were conducted. Stakeholder groups and topics of focus included corridor landowners, economic development, emergency services, parks & open space, bicycle & pedestrian needs, equity & underserved populations, and schools. While each group touched on different, discrete topics, the following key themes emerged from the discussions:

“Right now, Hendersonville Road is dangerous for those who aren’t as able-bodied.”

ACCESS MANAGEMENT

Poorly timed signals, lack of medians and numerous curb cuts all contribute to congestion, particularly south of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

NETWORK CONNECTIVITY

I-26, Hendersonville Road, and Sweeten Creek Road all influence each other, yet there is little east-west connectivity between them.

MOBILITY & SAFETY

Priorities between all modes must be rebalanced to better protect the safety of all. Poor design has led to congestion and dangerous conditions for all road users.

MITIGATE I-26 IMPACTS

Several years of upcoming construction will change travel patterns throughout South Asheville; Hendersonville Road must account for this shift.



Online Engagement

Project Website

Early in the process, the Hendersonville Road Corridor Study webpage was created on the FBRMPO website so residents, property owners, business owners and other stakeholders could access information and provide input on the corridor study. The website featured information on project purpose, dates and locations of upcoming meetings, meeting results, related documents, and ways to get involved with the project. Ahead of major public events, email notifications alerted the public to means of attendance. Combined with the MPO's publicizing efforts, as well as local news organizations, hundreds of people were able to hear about the study while it was being developed.

Among the ways to get involved through the website were a comment box, an online survey, and an interactive map tool. The comment box allowed for residents to leave general thoughts or ask questions which the project team could respond to directly. The survey and map were open for interaction for several months and closed when the design recommendations were completed. The results were left viewable on the website and are documented in the digital appendices of this report. Summaries of both are shown in figures on subsequent pages.



About the Hendersonville Road Corridor Study

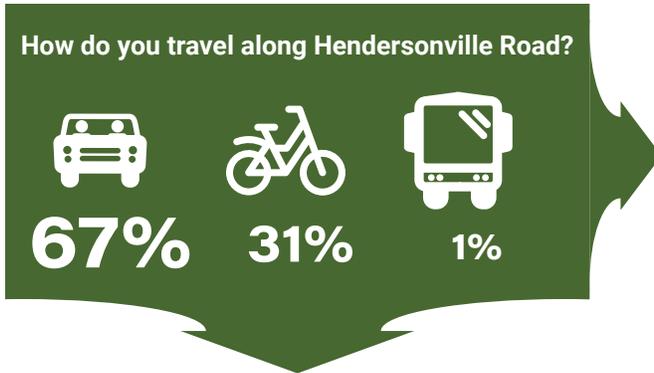


Online Survey

The online survey was developed at the beginning of the planning process along with the map tool and the website. It featured a set of 15 questions related to traveling conditions, development, and safety along Hendersonville Road, whereby respondents could voice concerns and rank priorities for the corridor. Survey responses provided general feedback, both qualitative and quantitative, that helped the Project team to see the full picture of Hendersonville Roads' challenges

and opportunities. These high-level, general responses complemented more detailed, first-hand discussions with focus groups and the advisory committee. The survey was critical to creating informed consent and reaching a broad spectrum of residents in the region.

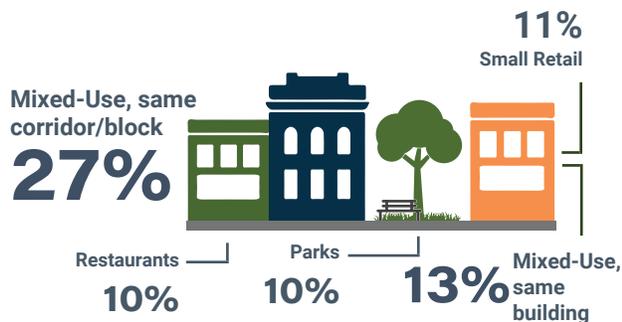
Nearly 200 participants responded to at least one question the survey. Responses were not required for all questions, causing variation in the number of responses between 132 to 153. Major take-aways are summarized here in the infographic below.



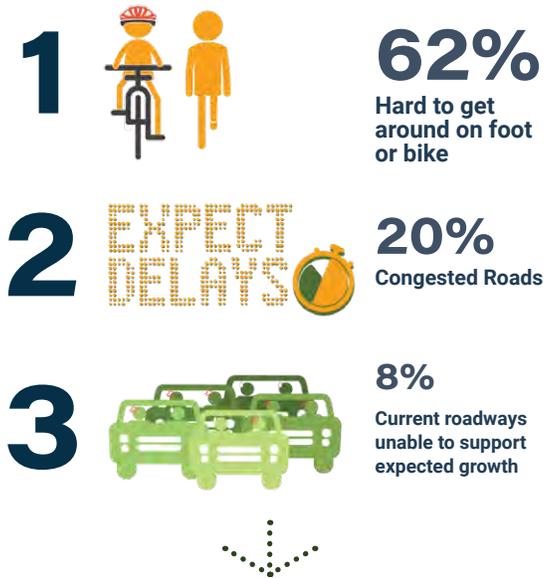
What best describes the type of destination or business you frequent the most?



What type of development is appropriate?



What's your biggest transportation concern for Hendersonville Road?



Transportation improvements for Hendersonville Road, ranked

(1 = most important, 8 = least important)



Interactive Map

To complement the electronic survey, a web-based crowd sourcing and mapping tool hosted by ESRI Online was tailored to Hendersonville Road to gather public knowledge challenges and opportunities along the corridor. Users accessed the tool through the project website and pin-pointed where problem areas and/or improvement potentialities were located. After selecting from a short list of point types, users were able to leave a comment to explain their take on the issue or potential solutions. Clustering comments indicated the importance or severity of the issue to the public.

This tool proved invaluable throughout the project, as residents were able to link their comments and ideas to georeferenced data, providing the exact location and description of their concern. The data received aided the planning process, particular with regards to prioritization, and identified places where bicycle and pedestrian improvements were needed. Ultimately, the map provided a different and needed perspective on corridor-level issues than could not be fully captured through face-to-face discussions or traditional survey methods.

The comments portrayed herein are representative of all of the comments provided. The full list of comments can be found in the digital appendices.

Legend

-  New/Improved Connection
-  Destination I Want to Travel To
-  Intersection Issue
-  Safety Hazard
-  Transit Issue

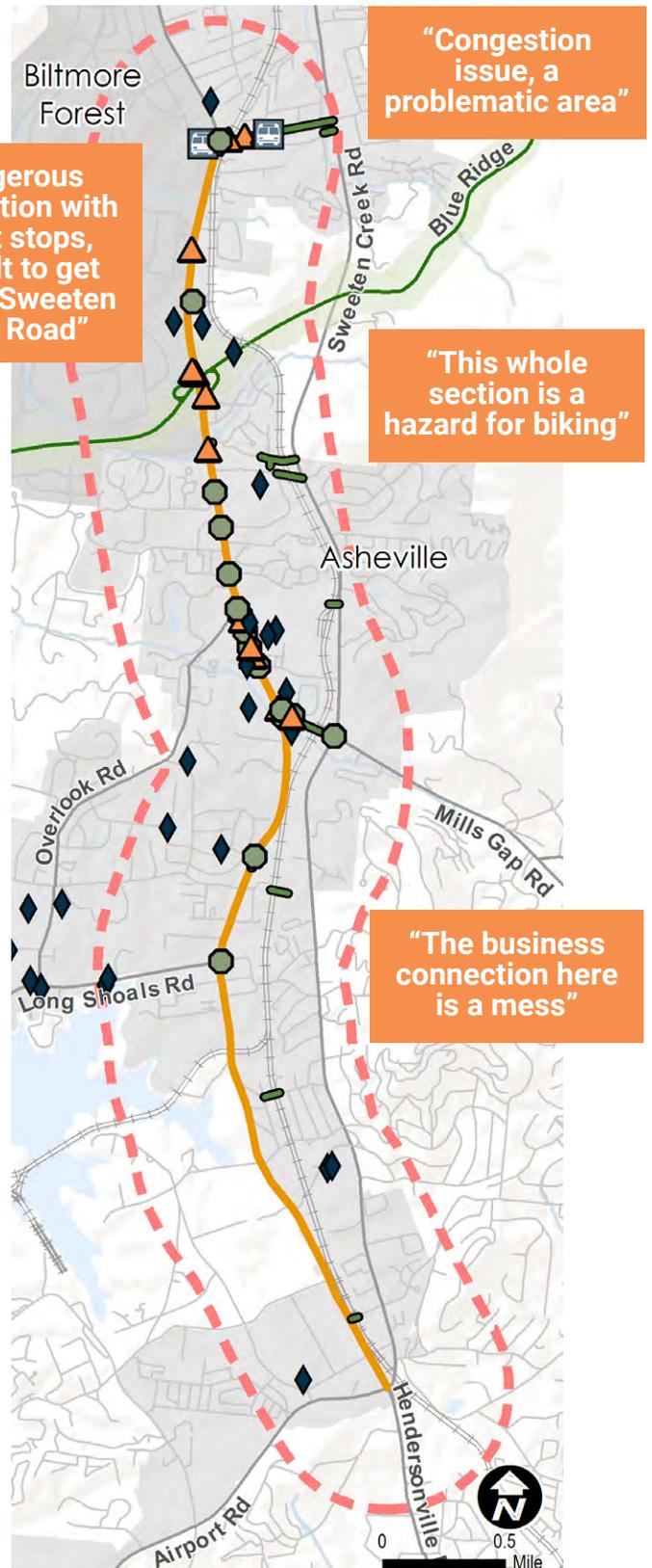


Figure 4.1: Interactive map comments.



Public Meetings

Project Symposium

The Virtual Public Symposium, held online via Zoom, was the first large scale public meeting for the Hendersonville Road Corridor Study. Approximately 70 members of the community were in attendance, along with news organizations reporting on the event. During this meeting the project was introduced, along with conditions inferred from data analysis and discussions with the Advisory Committee, and preliminary analysis done by the project team. A survey was given to the audience, and with Zoom's integrated polling capabilities the results were shown in real time, giving everyone the opportunity to see what they said as a community. During this portion of the presentation, members of the community were asked to explain the reasoning behind their answers, allowing everyone to see the perspectives of others. These discussions were facilitated by a member of the project team. Doing so allowed attendees to discuss the corridor how they wanted to, focusing in on areas they cared about the most, or detailing issues that they felt were most pressing, and coming up with solutions that could be implemented to improve the street. This provided the team with a large amount of public input and comments directly related to the corridor and the areas surrounding it.

Open House

The final public meeting of the planning process, the Open House, was held February 2020. With the COVID - 19 pandemic worsening at the time, the meeting was held, like others, as a virtual session on the Zoom platform. Nearly 50 community members attended, providing excellent feedback on the final design as well as recommendations for implementation and phasing of the project's completion.

The Open House allowed for community members to meet the project team, other stakeholders, and to view the final concept design for Hendersonville Road. While much of the design was completed during the Design Workshop, the project team continued to refine the ideas afterward into the complete vision.

“My family might use the transit system more if we could safely access it from Sweeten Creek via Rock Hill Road.”

— Symposium attendee, July 14

Symposium Snapshot

70

Total attendees

80%

of attendees feel unsafe walking or biking along Hendersonville Road

63%

say crashes and speeding vehicles are the biggest safety challenge



Design Workshop

The workshop, held in early October 2020, was the biggest and most coordinated push on the project. It included three formal virtual public meetings, effort from every member of the Advisory Committee and the entire project team was involved and on location for a three day intense design and engagement effort. This was held from October 7th to 9th online via Zoom and Mural, where the project team, consisting of planners, urban designers, landscape architects, and engineers worked in a collaborative online environment, producing much of the design and graphic work for the recommendations of the project.

Public-facing work sessions were held regularly throughout the three-day workshop to present concepts and receive feedback from stakeholders and the public. Morning sessions with stakeholders allowed the team

to drill down into nuances of design and its effects on targeted groups, such as corridor business owners and emergency services. Three public pin-up sessions were held each evening, wherein the entire public was invited to attend. Here, the proposed design concepts were presented, and questions could be asked by any attendee. This feedback was documented and taken back to the drawing board, where the design team could digest information received and innovate on the concept, or change it completely.

Some of the results of the visual preference survey are viewed here, and directly influenced the recommendations detailed in Chapter 6. During the final meeting, the public was able to view the resulting work produced out of the workshop and see how their feedback was incorporated in the conceptual designs and renderings. Following this meeting, everything produced during the week was viewable on the project website.



HENDERSONVILLE ROAD CORRIDOR STUDY

Virtual Design Workshop

The Project Team will be online refining design recommendations for this corridor. Join us daily to watch the progress and [share your feedback!](#)

WHERE: Online! More information is on the webpage: <http://frenchbroadrivermpo.org/hendersonville-road-corridor/>

WHEN: Wednesday 10/7 through Friday 10/9 2020

Meetings at: 10:00 am - 11:00 am & 5:00 pm - 6:30 pm
<https://zoom.us/join> Meeting ID: 920 8140 1683 Password: none
<https://zoom.us/join> Meeting ID: 960 9900 4635 Password: none

If you miss a meeting, visit the project webpage to watch recordings the next day!
Can't join the video? Join by phone: +1 (301) 715-8592, Meeting ID above



Above left: An excerpt from an advertisement for the public Virtual Design Workshop

Left: A screen shot of the online platform Mural.co that was used during the Virtual Design Workshop. The platform allows for online collaboration, review and feedback.



Key Takeaways

From this engagement, a select number of important issues and observations repeatedly became the subject of conversation, survey response, or map commentary. These issues, summarized below, represent the key takeaways from public engagement:

Safety

1. Speeding vehicles, high traffic volumes, and limited bicycle/pedestrian facilities contribute to unsafe conditions along Hendersonville Road.
2. Limited crossings spread out throughout the corridor, large gaps in sidewalks, and a total lack of bicycle lanes and multi-use paths force residents to choose automobiles -- even for short trips.

Connectivity

1. Lack of connectivity between Hendersonville Road, Sweeten Creek Road and I-26 forces commuters and motorists onto the Blue Ridge Parkway, Mills Gap Road, and Long Shoals Road, raising congestion and crash rates in these corridors.

Functionality

1. Poorly timed signals, confusing intersection design, numerous curb cuts and driveways, and a lack of cross access between complementary uses all contribute to congestion, conflict, and crashes along Hendersonville Road.
2. A fragmented sidewalk network and lack of bicycle facilities throughout the corridor only forces more vehicles onto the road.



Guiding Principles: A Recap

Although this study's Guiding Principles were laid out in Chapter 1, it is worthwhile to revisit the Principles once more at the end of the public engagement process. Intended to reflect the core takeaways both from quantitative analysis of the corridor as well as the many insights drawn from the broader Asheville community, these Principles guide the concept designs and recommendations in the chapters to follow.

Principle #1: Safety for All

Whether on two feet or two wheels, the notion that the corridor should be safe for everyone to move across and through is essential.

Principle #2: Choices for All

The vulnerability of bicyclists and pedestrians is high compared to automobile drivers and passengers. It is better to create an environment where walking and biking are not only encouraged but are the priority.

Principle #3: A Better Fit for All

Hendersonville Road can be transitioned into a Complete Street through re-purposing asphalt, better access management and development standards.

Principle #4: A Place (and Space) for All

Creating an aesthetic environment and enhanced beautification through the use of improved streetscaping details and repair/maintenance is vital to this objective. Just as important is creating attractive and convenient destinations along the corridor through placemaking and quality Urban design principles.



