

NORTH HIGHLAND LAKE ROAD PROJECT

The purpose of this special newsletter is to inform the residents of Flat Rock about the facts concerning the proposed N. Highland Lake Road Project and clarify some misconceptions.

Residents of Flat Rock have long appreciated the uniqueness of our Village. In order to maintain that character, future planning is critical. To that end, a group of Flat Rock citizens worked in cooperation with Orion Planning Group to create a Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP) in 2013. This Plan was adopted unanimously by the Village Council when completed. The plan has several sections, but the pertinent section for this discussion is section 4, Transportation. Of particular note are the following items in section 4:

- Action item 4.1 states that the ***Village will work in association with NCDOT to continually improve area roadways and transportation systems for vehicles, bicyclists, and pedestrians consistent with Village policy and planning goals.***
- Action item 4.8 directs the ***Village to develop sidewalks and multi-use trails using best management practices that are cost-effective and harmonious with the natural environment for the enjoyment of residents and tourists.***

The Village Council and Planning Board use the CLUP when making decisions that will impact the village. The proposed improvement of N. Highland Lake Road along with a multi-use path is in keeping with the goals and objectives of the CLUP, and the Council feels that they should consider a plan proposed by NCDOT.

In addition to the CLUP, the Village Council has also passed various resolutions and established other committees that support the inclusion of multiuse paths in the village. A historical summary and timeline of the road proposal can be found on the Village website.

In October of 2017, North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) submitted a plan that was presented to the public for input. That plan had some features that the Council found unacceptable. A revised plan is expected this spring. The Council will then review the plan and decide whether to ask NCDOT to abandon the project.

The Comprehensive Land Use Plan is a 27-page document. The Transportation section starts on page 13 and runs to page 15. You can see this document by visiting www.villageofflatrock.org and clicking on the left tab labeled Highland Lake Road Project. You will find other documents that are referred to in this newsletter there as well. If you do not have access to a computer, call or visit the Village Hall (110 Village Center Drive, 828 697 8100) and you will be provided with all documents

FAQ

Where did the N Highland Lake Road project originate?

- Since 2009, NCDOT ranks road projects to select which to include in its Statewide Transportation Improvement Project (STIP).
- In 2011, NCDOT Division 14 (which includes Henderson County) originated the N. Highland Lake Road improvement project. Based on the NCDOT points system, however, the project did not score high enough to justify funding, so the project did not go forward.
- In 2014, Division 14 again proposed the N Highland Lake Road improvement project. This time it ranked high enough for NCDOT to fund the project.

What makes this project necessary? The traffic on the road seems fine now.

- While growth in Flat Rock has been slow, Henderson County is growing rapidly. N. Highland Lake Road is a major collector road, which means it is a road that moves traffic from one area of high use to another area of high use. NCDOT studies indicate:
 - The current traffic volume is approximately 6,400 cars a day.
 - The anticipated volume in 2040, which is the target year NCDOT designs for, is about 9,700 cars a day.
 - Based on these NCDOT studies, if nothing is done, levels of congestion for approaches to Greenville Highway, Highland Park Road, and Highland Lake Drive will increase. Adding turn lanes and increased storage lengths will reduce future congestion rates to acceptable levels as traffic increases.
- NCDOT has deemed N. Highland Lake Road “substandard.”
 - The narrowness of the road does not allow for passage of emergency vehicles in case of an accident on the road.
 - Sight lines are not adequate or safe.
 - There are no shoulders for a car or bicycle to use to avoid an accident.
 - There were 91 reported vehicle crashes along N. Highland Lake Road from 2011 to 2016. 21 of those accidents resulted in injuries. There were 3 accidents in the last quarter of 2017 and a hit and run in February of 2018 that involved a bicyclist who suffered a broken leg. (Statistics and incident reports provided by NCDOT and Blue Ridge Fire and Rescue.
 - Left turn movement accounted for 37% of the accidents, while another 22% involved vehicles running off the road or sideswipes.
 - The addition of turn lanes, increased storage and improving the width of the travel lanes provides more margin of error to help drivers avoid these types of crashes.

This project also encourages transportation forms other than cars, while reducing conflicts between pedestrians, cyclists, and cars. This will help keep Flat Rock green.

I heard that NCDOT never awarded any points to this project. Why is it going forward?

Proposed road projects around the state compete for state funding based on a NCDOT point system; each project is given points based on a number of variables. Projects with enough points are considered for funding.

- Three entities award points for Flat Rock projects: NCDOT Raleigh, NCDOT District 14 and the French Broad Municipal Planning Organization (MPO).
- In 2014, the number of points awarded to the N. Highland Lake Road by NCDOT Raleigh and MPO was sufficient to allow this project to go forward. Division 14's points were not needed to justify funding. Division 14 then shifted their point allocation to other projects in the district.

Although District 14 did not use any of their points on this project, District 14 fully supports the N. Highland Lake Road project; recall District 14 originated the project in 2011 and has consistently supported it since that time.

How long has the Council been aware of this project?

- NCDOT gave their project recommendations to the Village Council in January 2016.
- In February 2016, NCDOT met with the Council in a regular open Council meeting to discuss the earlier January meeting and seek more input from the Village Council.
- The Planning Board was presented a summary of the NCDOT meetings later in February 2016.

When was the public informed?

- The Times-News reported on November 20, 2015 that, as a result of the state budget adopted in September, several NCDOT projects in Henderson County would be accelerated. Two new projects were added; one being the upgrade of N. Highland Lake Road from Greenville Highway to Spartanburg Highway with right of way acquisition commencing in 2020, and construction in 2022.
- Meetings about the project occurred between NCDOT and Village Council in February 2016 during open council meetings.
- NCDOT presented the preliminary plans for public input in October 2017.

A detailed historical summary of actions and notifications can be seen on the Flat Rock Village website.

How much of the road will be straightened?

- The Village Council requested that NCDOT keep road alignment as close to the current configuration as possible.
- The NCDOT plan shared with the public in October 2017 for the most part shows the road following its current path, except for the intersections with Highland Lake Drive and Highland Park Road. This portion would be somewhat straightened to provide improved sight line and thus increase safety at the entrance to the Highland Golf Villas community and the Park at Flat Rock.

How wide will the road be?

The plan voted on by the Village Council in June of 2018 is as follows:

- There road will remain two lanes with 11-foot-wide lanes for most of the distance. Speed limit will still be 35 MPH.
- Travel lanes near the Highland Park Drive and Highland Lake Drive will be 11 feet wide with a 11 left foot turning lane.
- A 2-foot curb and gutter will be added on the park side of the road, and a 2-foot paved shoulder will be on the opposite side.
- A 10-foot wide multi-use path will parallel the road but will located down in the park along the natural terrain and grade. The path will meander through existing trees, reducing the number of trees that need to be removed for this project.
- From Pinecrest church's rear drive on N Highland Lake Road to Greenville Highway, there will be a 5-foot sidewalk.
- The middle turn lane on N Highland Lake Drive where it meets Greenville Highway will be extended for more storage. The turn lane will be 11 feet wide and extend back about 40 feet from where it currently ends.
- Beyond the road's edge would be an 8- foot right of way for utilities and drainage. (The right of way is needed for access for NCDOT and utilities to do maintenance and repair.)
- The right of way would look like the surrounding landscape. Right now, there is a 25 to 30 foot right of way along both sides of the road. The current right of way is measured from the center of the road.
- DOT is committed to providing a project that will be in keeping with the feel and nature of the Village of Flat Rock. The road project will not encroach on any part of the historic district, except for the improvement of the turning radius on the south side to the intersection of N Highland Lake Road and Greenville Highway. Elements such as culvert design, the retaining wall at the church, and guard rails will all reflect the rural and historical nature of the surrounding area.

Why does the Council favor a multiuse path?

- This goes back to the CLUP mentioned in the introduction. One of the goals in the CLUP is to increase sidewalks, paths and greenways throughout the Village.
- A ten-foot-wide path would allow for bicyclists and pedestrians to share the path safely.
- The path would allow more people to access the park on foot.
- The path would eventually lead to paths that would link to Carl Sandburg, the Village center, and eventually Jackson Park and Blue Ridge Community College via the Oklawaha Greenway.

Why does the park need a new entrance? Is this why the Council wants the road changed?

- The current park entrance is shared with the Highland Golf Villas of over 44 homes.
- The current entrance to the park cannot safely accommodate large vehicles such as school buses and emergency vehicles.
- The original park plan showed an entrance further down N. Highland Lake Road in the area before the waterfall. That location was mandated by NCDOT. Due to the curvature of the road, NCDOT determined it was the only place with adequate sight lines for safety. The Village's projected construction cost of a new entrance at that location was almost \$1 million.
- The new road project would provide safer sight lines and turning lanes on the road, allowing the park entrance to be closer to the parking lot and to be constructed at a considerably lower cost.
- The new road project would also remove park traffic from Highland Golf Drive.
- The existing entrance to the park and Highland Golf Villa community is dangerous. It is difficult to see oncoming traffic when turning in or out of Highland Golf Drive. The RR tracks formerly provided a speed bump that slowed traffic down. The RR has recently repaired the tracks and cars now come over the tracks much faster.

Gaining a new park entrance was not the driving factor in the Council's decision to let this plan go forward. As planning proceeded, it became apparent that this would be another benefit of the project. The new proposed entrance was added midway in the process.

Will this project affect the Pinecrest Presbyterian Church and Western Carolina Veterinary Hospital in a negative way?

- The Council has asked NCDOT to minimize the impact on every landowner whose property abuts the road and always take property from the Park as a primary action.
- The property of the Church, Veterinary Hospital, and other businesses along N. Highland Lake Road must be protected. Council and NCDOT are very sensitive to this issue.

How much land will be taken from the historic district?

- The Village asked NCDOT to do the road improvements on the park side as much as possible.
- A small amount of land from the Historic District will be taken in order to improve the turning radius at the southeast corner of N Highland Lake Drive and Greenville Highway. NC State Historic Preservation Office was consulted about this encroachment. NCSHPO has ruled that the road project would not significantly reduce the size of the historic district or change its designation or nature.

What about the trees?

- Almost all the trees that would be removed along the road are located along the park's edge.
- NCDOT is sensitive to Flat Rock's love of trees and has assured the Council it will preserve as many trees as possible.
- NCDOT will replant some trees.
- The Village will augment the NCDOT landscape allowance with financing the planting of an increased number of larger trees.

Note: This road project can be an opportunity to improve the tree-lined entrance to the Village over the long term by planting larger, long-lived native hardwoods.

Is this the beginning of NCDOT's plans to widen other roads in Flat Rock such as Greenville Highway and Little River Road?

- No. Any rumors of widening other roads in Flat Rock are simply not true.
- There are NO PLANS within a 10-year horizon to widen Little River Road, Rutledge Drive or Greenville Highway. Ten years is the longest time in the future that NCDOT considers new plans.
- Most transportation projects originate with the MPO and NCDOT Division 14, which propose them to NCDOT Raleigh for consideration. Flat Rock has a representative at these organizations (usually a council member), and when road projects for Flat Rock are proposed, Flat Rock can push them down to the bottom of the list.
- Through village representation on the Henderson County Transportation Advisory Committee and the French Broad MPO, we can keep a future widening plan from ever reaching fruition.

In fact, in the 1990's the state had plans to widen Greenville Highway, then known as US 25. Greenville Highway is a scenic byway and Village leaders worked with NCDOT to designate a connector road between Greenville Highway and Spartanburg Highway as US25, and redesignate Greenville Highway through the Village as NC225.

Are the majority of residents against this project?

- In the fall of 2017 after two public information sessions, NCDOT asked for resident input. The results indicated an almost even split in opinion.
- 89 comments were in favor of the road in some form. 97 comments were against some part of road improvement. Of the 97 opposed to the project, 68 wanted to do nothing.
- Resident input to the Council has been an even split between for and against.

Some have said that this will negatively change the character of Flat Rock forever.

It is hard to see how slightly widening a road a little over a mile long and adding a walking path can ruin a community. This project is in keeping with the CLUP. The Council and NCDOT are aware of the spirit and character of the Village. No one wants that destroyed.

This plan offers many benefits to the Village and will not spoil Flat Rock's "Sense of Place." The Council wants a plan that will give maximum benefits with minimum impact and follows the future planning guidelines for Flat Rock. The Council's duty is to plan for Flat Rock's future.

This plan is not gateway to urbanization. This is a plan to improve a road in Flat Rock to be compatible for future growth and use, as well as providing a way to access the park without using a car. The multi-use path is part of a larger plan to connect the park to Connemara, The Village center and potentially to other parts of Henderson County.

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