
NORTH CHARLOTTESVILLE BUSINESS COUNCIL
of the
Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce
P O Box 234 • Charlottesville, Virginia 22901

April 26, 2007

Dear Chairman Boyd:

The North Charlottesville Business Council of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce (“NCBC”) has been following closely, and actively participating in, the Virginia Department of Transportation / Albemarle County “Places 29” planning process since it began almost two years ago.

As you know, our NCBC members have attended the public meetings and have made significant efforts to be involved. The NCBC has expended energy, time and resources in this effort and has provided written comments at the start and throughout the public comment periods (attached). We have worked collaboratively with the planning effort and planners throughout this extended process.

At this juncture we are compelled to share our disappointment with this planning effort’s process. More importantly, we are gravely concerned with major parts of the Places 29 Plan as currently proposed. Parts are unrealistic and wrong and other parts are too undefined to evaluate properly. We request the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors take a serious look at the deficiencies of the Plan before letting it move forward for final community comment and commencement of the approval process.

Parts of the Places 29 Plan do not reflect current land use, economic and transportation realities. There seems to be no serious consideration of timing, phasing, priorities, construction, costs, and disruptions of existing activity. Some examples of the deficiencies and of the current Plan are provided on the attached exhibit.

The NCBC thinks it would be a mistake to proceed to a concluding step with this Plan at this time. The process has not been responsive to the stakeholders that we represent. Realizing the Plan requires a contribution or the taking of land and businesses. The support is not there. This support is particularly important for the Plan to be successfully implemented in today’s world of limited public transportation resources. By our observations we are not the only citizens who have been “processed-by” rather than being “responded-to” in the public participation component of this Plan. We think a little more effort to “get it right” with the community before asking the community to start the approval process would be worthwhile. This should not be just a “planners plan.” It should be a plan that is realistic and that has had the thoughtful participation and support of the business community, and the neighborhoods that will be effected. So far, speaking for our NCBC members, this has not been the case. To expend the energies of the community to try to approve this Plan will only lead to another painful exercise in raising community acrimony and expectations without accomplishment. Please don’t do this.

We recognize that the planning for the urban center of the County and our Region's main transportation corridor along a national highway is complicated. We applaud you and the Board of Supervisors for your willingness to face this challenge. We want to have a vibrant urban core for Albemarle County connected by a workable, walk-able, community-focused main boulevard. The NCBC wants to be included in developing such a plan; a real plan; a plan we can accomplish. Please ask the planners to work with us on a developing such a plan.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to the Board's response.

Sincerely,

x / Michael McGowan

Michael McGowan, Chairman
North Charlottesville Business Council

The Honorable Kenneth Boyd
Chairman of the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors
Albemarle County Office Building
401 McIntire Road
Charlottesville, Virginia 22902

cc: The Honorable Robert Tucker, Albemarle County Executive
The Honorable Members of the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors
The Chamber Board of Directors

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Exhibit 1 – April 26, 2007

The following are some examples of parts of the proposed Places 29 plan which are problematic. This is not meant to be a complete list and is not meant to say that there are not very good parts of the Places 29 Plan. Please read it for what it is.

Many of the new concept roads being drawn to allow better local traffic flow show “too much imagination” in their planning. Safety of pedestrians entering and exiting stores, impossible terrain being utilized, existing buildings, and right of ways that could never be obtained from the landowners did not seem to be considered in much of the design.

This same comment is true with regard to the use of the connections at the proposed grade-separated interchange at Rio Road & US 29, which rely on having roads through adjacent businesses and shopping centers to be used as the “on-off ramps” to the buried section of US29. We have been disappointed to hear this mischaracterized in public presentations by the planners of the Places 29 Plan as a suggestion of the business community. We have only heard “no” and sometimes “h--- no” to this “solution” from the parties who are anticipated in the Plan to willingly donate their “right of way.” No other alternate connections of Rio Road to US 29 are proposed.

The Plan does not anticipate the substantial construction issues it raises. For example, to build the interchanges shown at either Hydraulic Road or Rio Road and at the same time maintain traffic flow at levels somewhat comparable to current traffic flow, major design changes will be required. In effect, each half of the current US29 highway will have to be relocated to the east and to the west of the current track before any construction work on the overpasses can begin. The plans should indicate this.

The Plan provides no presentation of the character that is anticipated for our Main Street. This is and has been our group’s focus. There are beautiful drawings of “gasoline alley” (East Rio Road at Greenbrier Road) and an urbanized Berkmar Drive. We can see US29 at oblique angles and sometimes in the background of “visualizations.” We think a plan for Places 29 ought to show some places on US29.

We have asked to see pedestrian crossings. We have asked to see better lighting, signage, better landscaping. Some are shown on plans some are to be added later. We have never been able to ascertain if any of these things have any priority; they appear to be the last to be planned and we fear the last to be budgeted and never to be built.

We have other concerns, and positive comments as well, which we are developing as we study the plan. We will continue to share these with you as they are developed.

NORTH CHARLOTTESVILLE BUSINESS COUNCIL
of the
Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce
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June 12, 2006

RE: Places 29 – Comments on the Three Frameworks

Dear Mr. Rue:

The North Charlottesville Business Council commends the Places 29 Planning efforts to include the community in the process to set priorities for Albemarle County's urban corridor. We appreciate this opportunity to share the Council's thoughts on the three frameworks of the Places 29 Study.

NCBC thinks the plan to have parallel roads to US 29, as part of our central road network, is excellent. We agree with the proposals to have greater density of development. We agree that this will both help preserve the County's rural areas and create the critical mass needed for a successful mixed-use environment. We think the best way to accomplish this goal is to build a flexible transportation network and adopt a flexible land use master plan. This will allow landowners, developers and local government to take advantage of the growth and change that will come. As a community we should set high standards for projects and then look for opportunities to realize the potential of this area. If the level of detail in land use designation and location in the frameworks is representational, that's good. Deciding today exactly where midtown or uptown must be is unnecessary. It will only limit our chances for success.

NCBC agrees with the division of the study area into three districts. However, we would have them run along the route of US 29. The southern zone (from the Charlottesville/Albemarle border to Rio Road) is for the most part, built; and the transportation, development/redevelopment and planning issues are quite different from the middle zone (from Rio Road to the South Fork of the Rivanna River) or the northern zone. The northern zone is the area that seems to allow for implementation of the proposed frameworks. It has large, undeveloped or developing tracts, large-scale, green-field projects and the ability to establish new road networks. We generally agree with the transportation framework in the northern zone. We want to hear more about what happens to parallel roads, connections and implementation of a workable, build-able scheme as the road network meets the city. For example, what happens to the traffic once the parallel roads end? At this point, NCBC does not think that there has been enough information provided to have an intelligent opinion about the transportation side of the frameworks in the middle and southern zones. Maybe a re-look at the US 29 Western Bypass at some point in the process would make sense.

NCBC, despite our active involvement throughout the process, also has not seen enough information to comment on the frameworks from the standpoint of the aesthetic, humane and civic interests we expressed in our policy statement at the beginning of this study. (October 2005, see attached.) We continue to hear and are gratified by representations that we are not alone with these concerns and that they will be addressed more specifically in the next round of the study. We look forward to seeing this presentation.

We are extremely glad that the community and our leaders are examining these issues in our urban core. We remain committed to seeing the center of Albemarle County reach its full potential.

Sincerely,

x / Michael McGowan

Michael McGowan, Chairman
North Charlottesville Business Council

cc: The Honorable Members of the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors
The Honorable Pierce Homer, Secretary of Transportation
The Honorable Robert Tucker, Albemarle County Executive
The Honorable John Davies, Commonwealth Transportation Board
The Board of Directors, North Charlottesville Business Council
The Board of Directors, Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce

Mr. Harrison Rue, Executive Director
Charlottesville – Albemarle Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization
Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission
PO Box 1505
401 East Water Street
Charlottesville, Virginia 22902

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“Places 29” Transportation Position Statement

US Route 29 is a key national highway. It is also the “Main Street” of Albemarle County and Greater Charlottesville’s most dense, mixed-use district. This district is “Central Albemarle.” The North Charlottesville Business Council of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce (“NCBC”) supports those improvements to Central Albemarle, US 29 and the surrounding travel network that enhance the district’s operation as a lively, community-oriented, mixed-use area with a central boulevard. We support projects that will make Central Albemarle *someplace special* and that will facilitate establishing a vibrant *unified community* in Albemarle County’s center.

In this region, we are proud of our Jeffersonian heritage. As a first step in contributing to local enjoyment of our Main Street, NCBC in partnership with the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Federal Government and Albemarle County recently added rows of trees to the US 29 median. Over the last decade, we as a community have added traffic lanes and some sidewalks. Unfortunately we have not done anything to allow pedestrians or bicyclist to move east and west across our Main Street. In fact it is increasingly difficult for cars to travel across US 29. As our Main Street continues to evolve into a major high volume highway, it cuts Central Albemarle into two pieces and diminishes its civility. It is time to set higher standards for the public’s use and enjoyment of Central Albemarle; standards that are consistent with our heritage.

We applaud the “Places 29” planning effort that Albemarle’s County government has initiated. We make the following suggestions to improve Central Albemarle.

Someplace Special: Basic Beautification Projects

- Install textured crosswalks and similar pavement treatments. Explore pedestrian bridges in high-density areas.
- Provide additional sidewalks, bike paths and landscaping on connector roads, like Berkmar Drive, Rio and Hydraulic Roads.
- Install and actively maintain landscaping in the center median that is consistent with our position as America’s #1 Community.
- Install and maintain consistent, permanent and attractive signs and sign equipment.
- Remove or relocate overhead power and communication lines.

A Unified Community: Improving connections for the safe, efficient movement of people.

- Provide additional alternative routes for all forms of local travel to improve circulation within Central Albemarle. The proposed Hillsdale Drive extension and Meadowcreek Parkway are good examples of alternative automobile/bike/pedestrian routes.

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“Places 29” Transportation Position Statement
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- Add new signaled intersections on Seminole Trail to provide alternates to increasingly congested existing intersections and facilitate east-west travel. With proper signal timing, this can be done without disrupting north-south traffic.
- Ensure all lights are timed to facilitate balanced traffic flow. This can be done in both Albemarle County and the City of Charlottesville.
- Provide safe routes for pedestrian and bicycle travel. Provide a system of bike and walking paths throughout Central Albemarle.
- Prohibit further widening of US 29 between Hydraulic and Polo Grounds Road. This will only increase problems at intersections and make connecting across the district more difficult.

Other Considerations

- Modify existing planning and zoning to promote an urban, mixed-use character within the area. Changes could include decreasing building setbacks, on-street parking, and more flexible height restrictions in appropriate areas.
- Identify places and create public parks to facilitate increased activity within the district.
- Establish general budget funding of improvements that benefit the community.
- Establish incentives and eliminate obstacles to promote private development consistent with district goals.
- Utilize planners to help establish long term goals for Central Albemarle. Ask for plans that demonstrate the full potential of a vibrant Central Albemarle when an alternative route for regional/interstate traffic is constructed.
- The NCBC continues to question the efficacy and cost of grade-separated intersections. Those suggested in the past did more to create further divisions than to facilitate local use and enjoyment.
- While we recognize the local government nature of this effort, as citizens of the Commonwealth, we recognize and continue to advocate for broader transportation solutions to the congested and growing interregional and national traffic needs along a key national highway. The NCBC continues to believe that a US 29 western bypass can and should provide some relief to this unacceptable condition. It will also allow for greater flexibility in realizing the potential for local use and enjoyment of our Main Street.

– *Approved by the NCBC Board of Directors,*
Michael McGowan, Chairman
October 2005