

## ***NORTH CHARLOTTESVILLE BUSINESS COUNCIL***

of the

***Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce***

PMB 234 - 977 Seminole Trail • Charlottesville, Virginia 22901-2824

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May 1, 2009

Dear Secretary Homer:

We are writing to you to express formally, the concerns of the North Charlottesville Business Council (NCBC) about the continuing difficulties improving the efficiency and safety of United States Route 29 within the Albemarle County and Charlottesville area.

For your reference, the North Charlottesville Business Council was organized as a council of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce in 1993 to promote desirable growth and development within the US29 corridor area by fostering a constructive business environment in which to accomplish its goals of prosperity, expansion, and development. The NCBC, with more than 70 member enterprises, strives to further the business success of its membership and enhance the civic, general welfare, and the quality of life the area.

We applaud your initiative and welcome the opportunity that this latest Virginia Department of Transportation US29 study – from the North Carolina border to Interstate 66 in Gainesville – may finally produce a firm blueprint for the future of this very important north-south highway of “National Significance” in our Commonwealth of Virginia. A similar study, launched in 1992, however concluded without reaching clear conclusions. Hopefully, this undertaking will be more productive.

Within our own Albemarle/Charlottesville region, enhancing US29 itself, operating as a vibrant commercial boulevard, has been central to our NCBC mission. As such we are challenged to understand how any long-term planning vision can improve the current and future traffic needs of this area’s main transportation corridor without providing an alternative route for through traffic. This would allow those daily vehicles, last estimated in 2005 as being 10%-20% of a 50,000+ Average Annual Daily Traffic Count (Hydraulic Road @ US29), to bypass our central commercial district.

VDOT’s own congestion and accident data, displayed prominently at the recent VDOT US29 study public meetings, reveal that congestion is down and safety improved in Danville, Lynchburg, Madison Heights, Amherst, Madison, Culpeper and Warrenton – all with bypass routes – and dramatically higher in Charlottesville/Albemarle and Gainesville, both areas lacking bypass routes.

US29 is a highway that complements the Interstate Highway System. A geographical fact shows that, if a straight line is drawn between New York and Atlanta on a map of the United States, that line bisects Virginia — right through Charlottesville/Albemarle — following approximately US29. Taking a further look, one sees that south of Virginia that line is paralleled by Interstate 85, and north of Virginia by Interstate 95.

One can conclude that there is a segment missing in the Interstate system, which if it existed would parallel US29 in Virginia. In Georgia, South Carolina and in North Carolina up to Greensboro, I-85 does run intertwined with US29. Then again, from Washington, DC, to Baltimore, I-95 runs parallel to US29. The same straight line on the map, referred to above, that starts in New York, also runs through Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington.

US29 is an obvious transportation link along the Piedmont corridor and is preceded in that same corridor by the railroad. Thus US29 serves not only the Virginia cities and communities along its way such as Danville, Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Culpeper and Warrenton; but also the entire region between Washington and Atlanta. This includes major metropolitan areas such as Greenville and Spartanburg in South Carolina; and Gastonia, Charlotte and Greensboro in North Carolina.

Historically, the Commonwealth of Virginia has gradually upgraded US29 in an incremental fashion, by building limited-access bypasses in the most congested areas. Such as is the case in Danville, Chatham, Gretna, Altavista, Lynchburg, Madison Heights, Amherst, partially around the City of Charlottesville, Madison, Culpeper, Remington and Warrenton.

Currently the most congested areas, which are in urgent need of an upgrade, are the areas in and north of Charlottesville — in Albemarle County — and the Gainesville area. It would be highly desirable that this study finally lays down a workable and detailed plan for the future upgrade of US29 in the Charlottesville / Albemarle area.

In the last 35 years a number of attempts have been made to devise solutions for the upgrade of US 29 in our area, including a well advanced plan for a western bypass, for which the right-a-way has already been purchased by VDOT. This “shovel-ready” infrastructure project has been stalled, blocked, for many years.

Regardless of previous history, there seems to be two possible solutions, which would meet the goal of a limited-access national highway — which is a roadway with no driveways and no traffic lights — capable of permitting traffic to flow consistently at 55 miles per hour; just like all the other bypasses along US29 in Virginia. These options are:

1. Advance and build the planned US 29 western bypass, with a second phase extension further northwards; or,
2. Advance and build an expressway through the center of the current US29 commercial corridor.

Option one, has been engineered, and subjected to environmental studies and court challenges. The right-of-way for this project has been acquired, significant engineering is complete and the project could be built as funds become available. At the same time plans could be developed to extend this bypass further north.

Option two, would be to design and construct a center expressway, which has not been thoroughly studied. Of course such a workable expressway would most likely cause gross economic dislocation along our community's most vibrant commercial corridor. (*Sound engineering would suggest that the footprint for such a project could require increasing the current right-of-way, of generally 160 feet in width, to about 300 feet across several miles of built, successful commerce.*) Furthermore, building such a center-line expressway would cost several times more than a bypass.

How great might the economic dislocation of such a project or series of projects be?

Currently the US 29 corridor from the US29/250 bypass to Greene County is home to more than 20,000 jobs, representing a total payroll of more than \$800 million each year. The US29 corridor generates 45% of Albemarle County's total annual local tax revenues.

The legacy of such massive urban renewal projects is not pretty.

We have taken the liberty to suggest to you and any interested professional or citizen just how extensive a project the expressway option might be.

Clearly the expressway option would suggest that the existing alignment right-of-way would need to be almost doubled. First, existing traffic flow has to be maintained during construction of overpasses and underpasses. Secondly, once the high-speed lanes are in operation, local low-speed traffic lanes are necessary to allow access to a rebuilt commercial area.

We have taken further liberty to provide a rough schematic sketch of such a corridor.

Over the years, indeed decades, various proposals have been made in our locality to improve traffic on the current US29 alignment. All of which fail to address the basic requirements of no traffic lights, no driveways and a sustainable speed of 55 MPH. The latest flawed proposal — still under development by our local Charlottesville Albemarle Transportation Municipal Planning Organization — is called “Places29.” This latest integrated land-use/transportation plan currently envisions a center corridor with 15 traffic signals and is projected to allow an average speed of 30 MPH at full capacity. How does this advance traffic efficiency and our region’s economic vitality?

Our NCBC has steadfastly held that the current US29 alignment cannot serve both options as Greater Charlottesville’s main commercial boulevard and as a safe, efficient artery of the national highway system. To date, no planning professionals have ever demonstrated to NCBC even a single instance within Virginia or beyond, of such a successful duality of transportation purposes.

The VDOT US29 study must look at all options along the entire 219-mile highway from North Carolina to Gainesville. We do not envy your task. In order to maintain credibility within our region and beyond, this important US29 study must include consideration of both of the options suggested above. Of course our NCBC greatly prefers the bypass option over the expressway option.

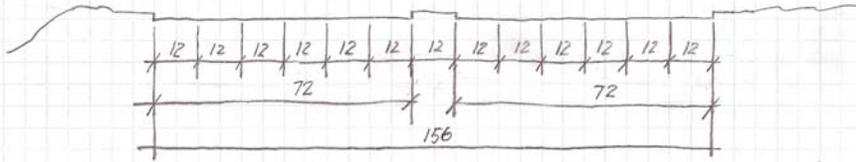
With a bypass, the current US29 corridor between the US250 bypass and the South Fork Rivanna River would be enhanced as the vibrant urban boulevard we envision, adding amenities such as improved landscaping, handsome, safe pedestrian crossings, decorative street lighting, bus shelters, etc.

We appreciate this opportunity Mr. Secretary, to raise our concerns with you. We trust you will consider these concerns and look forward to your response. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
*x/Lloyd F. Wood*  
Lloyd F. Wood  
Chairman, NCBC

The Honorable Pierce R. Homer  
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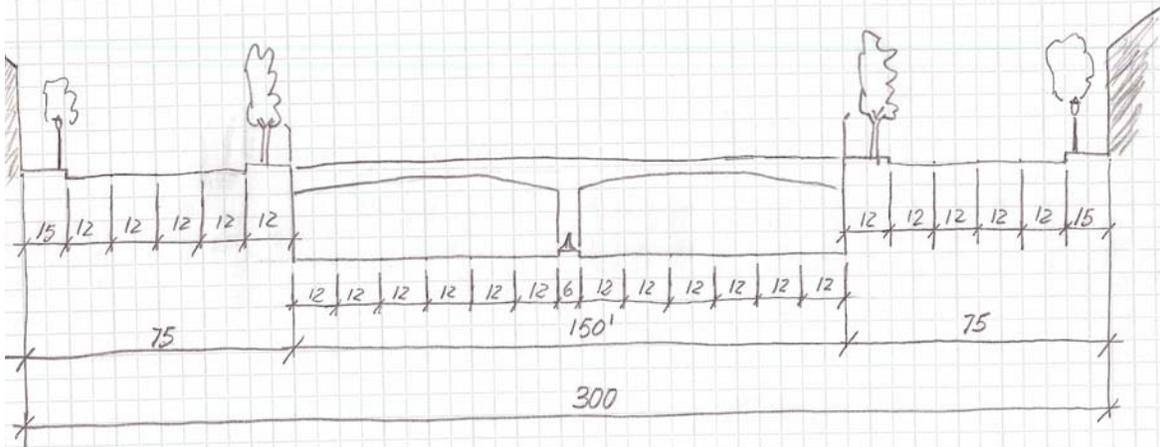
cc: Board of Directors, North Charlottesville Business Council  
Board of Directors, Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce



Existing Conditions  
 Cross section, north of Hydraulic Rd., looking south  
 (at K-Mart)



Intermediate Stage  
 Cross section, north of Hydraulic Rd., looking south



Final Stage  
 Cross section, north of Hydraulic Rd., looking south