

Albemarle Supervisors suggest new transportation projects for long-range plan
written by | September 4, 2013



Members of the Albemarle Board Supervisors said Wednesday they would like additional projects considered in an update of the region's long-range transportation plan, including an extension of South Pantops Drive across the Rivanna River.

"It would take a lot of pressure [off Free Bridge], because you would be able to drive all the way from Peter Jefferson Place across the river to get into the city," Supervisor Kenneth C. Boyd said.

Boyd's comments came during a presentation by Sarah Rhodes, director of transportation programs for the Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Some supervisors had asked for a clarification about how projects are being vetted as part of the update of the transportation plan, which Rhodes said must be adopted by May 2014.

Work on the update has been underway since the beginning of 2011.

"This is a long-time, 50,000-feet look at transportation for our future," Rhodes said. "Long-range transportation plans must be fiscally constrained, which means we can't spend more than we reasonably expect to get over the course of the plan."

For the first time, transportation improvements are being analyzed using a computer model generated by MPO staff.

"The goal with this plan was to be much more technical than we have been in the past," Rhodes said. "We wanted to assess all of our transportation projects using a series of performance metrics."

In all, 22 projects have been compared to the model, and 15 were subjected to a cost-benefit analysis.

"Some of those projects were discarded because they didn't allow enough benefit and that discard process took place through our committees," Rhodes said.

So far, all decisions that have been made concern "capacity-building" projects that would add more road lanes or bus routes.

Supervisor Dennis S. Rooker said improvements, such as grade-separated interchanges on U.S. 29, should also have been discussed already.

"By doing that, you have in effect discarded projects without really understanding the impact on [traffic] delay," Rooker said. "Most delays in the community occur at intersections."

A grade-separated interchange at U.S. 29 and Rio Road is in the long-range plan adopted in May 2009, but one at U.S. 29 and Hydraulic Road was placed on a wish list for future projects. Rooker said he wanted both projects to be in the mix.

"If we're going to get cyclists and pedestrians across a 10-lane road, you really need to have some way to get them under or over," Rooker said. "To not deal with this in the long-range transportation plan would be a bad mistake."

Supervisor Ann H. Mallek said she wanted to also consider additional interchanges on Interstate 64.

"Other places have them every half a mile," Mallek said. "In Northern Virginia they have them and it works great."

Boyd suggested the second bridge into Charlottesville as an alternative to an estimated \$ widening of U.S. 250. He asked for the MPO staff to model a project to expand South Pantops Drive across the river. That project is in the various scenarios, but as a transit-only project.

Charlottesville officials have been opposed to a South Pantops Drive extension, which is why

transportation planners with the have so far only listed the users of that prospective bridge as buses, cyclists and pedestrians.

Rhodes said modeling the effects of the bridge would require direction from the full MPO Policy Board, which is made up of two city councilors, Supervisors Rodney S. Thomas and Duane E. Snow, and the administrator of VDOT's Culpeper District. The MPO will take up the issue later this month.

Another potential project being evaluated is the creation of a bus rapid transit system between downtown and several potential destinations. This would carry a lifetime cost of up to \$148 million for a service with features such as traffic lights along the route that would automatically turn green for buses.

Rooker questioned that expense.

"If you're going to say that over the next 20 years, we're going to allocate another \$100 million to transit, how do you best do that?" Rooker said. "All of the studies show that transit is generally only successful when you have reasonably dense populations."

Rhodes agreed and said that the model is designed to help evaluate the effectiveness of projects.

"It would be a considerable investment for this community and so if it were to move forward, we would need to be pretty sure that this community would use it," Rhodes said.

Rooker also took the opportunity to express his opposition to a proposal to turn U.S. 29 into an urban boulevard as outlined in a scenario known as "multimodal 29" that would have a 35 mph speed limit and dedicated bus lanes.

"We have a U.S. 29 where we spent \$100 million widening and now we're talking about turning it into a low-speed road," Rooker said. "A lot of my constituents would not be thrilled with the idea."

Snow said citizens should keep in mind that planning on a long horizon is a speculative exercise.

"Back in 1983, I don't think we envisioned what we have now, even with the best case guesses," Snow said. "This is a starting point and it will be altered a thousand times over the next 30 years."