

Business community updated on Hydraulic/U.S. 29 intersection changes
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As the dust settles on several major transportation projects along U.S. 29, the business community was briefed Thursday on the development of another round of improvements in and around the highway's intersection with Hydraulic Road.

"This transportation project is at the epicenter of our community," said James Dikmen, the chairman of the North Downtown Business Council. "Our main street is a powerful economic engine for our community. We need to protect it and we need to foster growth along it."

The Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission is overseeing development of both a small-area plan and transportation study that are intended to serve as a guideline for the future of the intersection.

"The last time it was counted, there was something on the order of 56,000 vehicles per day," said Tim Hulbert, the president of the Greater Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce. "This is the most-traveled point in our entire region, and we have some plans now to go forward and make it better."

Three quadrants of the intersection are within Charlottesville city limits and the fourth, at the Stonefield development, is within Albemarle County.

It is not likely there will be one big transportation project at the intersection. Instead, the Virginia Department of Transportation will likely create a series of smaller projects to increase the likelihood of

getting projects funded through the agency's Smart Scale prioritization process.

"This helps the county and the city make recommendations as developers come forward with ideas in order to shape development," said Dave Covington, a VDOT engineer who served as project manager for the Route 29 Solutions projects that were funded after the demise of the Western Bypass of U.S. 29.

Those included the grade-separated interchange at Rio Road, a northern extension of Berkmar Drive and the widening of U.S. 29 to six lanes between Polo Ground Roads and Hollymead Town Center.

Hillsdale Drive Extended is also part of the first round of projects. It had been expected to be opened by the end of October, but the project's completion has been delayed.

Now VDOT and area officials are trying to craft new projects to submit for the Smart Scale round next summer. This is being done in tandem with land use planning to facilitate redevelopment.

"We're talking about long horizons, and not everything will be developed as it is shown," Covington said.

Covington said the transportation study had initially focused on seeing whether the Hydraulic Road intersection could emulate the Rio Road interchange, but a panel of stakeholders began to think about the bigger picture around the intersection.

"What if we moved up the street at Zan Road and look at a crossing there?" Covington said as he showed a potential bridge that would cross U.S. 29. "This is really about moving traffic east and west; pedestrians, bicycles, transit and cars."

Hillsdale Drive could be extended further south to U.S. 250. A two-lane roundabout could be built at Hillsdale's intersection with Hydraulic Road.

"What this allows us to do is create a true parallel roadway," Covington said.

At the intersection of U.S. 29 and Hydraulic Road, Covington said, one idea is to place turning movements below the existing grade.

"What we're showing here is to take the left turns from U.S. 29 and depress them," Covington said. "And then we would take Hydraulic Road and depress that and have the bottom section be signalized and remove the signal at the top."

Another bridge could be built across Angus Road, and the existing traffic signal would be eliminated. Another roundabout could be built at District Avenue and Hydraulic Road.

The details for each project will continue to be refined through next summer.

Hulbert wanted to know when the projects might get under construction and asked if there were cost estimates. Covington said there is not a good answer for either question.

"What we need to count on is a good application from the city and county for a group of these projects," Covington said. "Because of the work that we've done so far in linking land use and transportation, I think we're going to have a really good application that will score well."

“There are going to be a number of these things prioritized and put into projects,” said Joel DeNunzio, the administrator of VDOT’s Charlottesville residency. “You will probably see phases of development as we go along, so I wouldn’t expect construction at one time.”

DeNunzio also presented data on travel times following the opening of the Route 29 Solutions projects that have been built to date. Data collected from Bluetooth devices on vehicles show that travel times between Hydraulic and Airport roads have decreased around 20 percent.

VDOT also has tracked crashes in the vicinity of the Rio Road intersection. The grade-separated intersection opened on July 19, 2016, and there were 54 crashes in the year that followed.

That is down from 93 in the same period from 2012 to 2013.

“So far, in one year, we’re seeing a good trend,” DeNunzio said. “Anytime you remove the conflict point, you get less crashes.”